



graysing

arc VI

magician



Once again, we zip back to the past.



Hehe. We certainly showed him. I'll never forget that look on his face.

We can torture him any way we please now.



Won't be as satisfying as this ever again, but still fun.

I wonder, do you think he'll cry? He's a lot more ... fragile than I thought. Even better.



What do you think, Col?



I'm not touching him again.

Who? What's the matter? Why are you sad? Aren't you glad I'm happy now?

Something isn't right... It's good that you're happy...



Yes... but...



But now instead of just me being broken... Fern is too.



You mean to say that after ALL of this you STILL care more about Fern than ME?!

I'm your fucking BROTHER, CAL!



I know.. I know, Rae.. But we can't stay alone forever... This isn't working.. we're both misre-

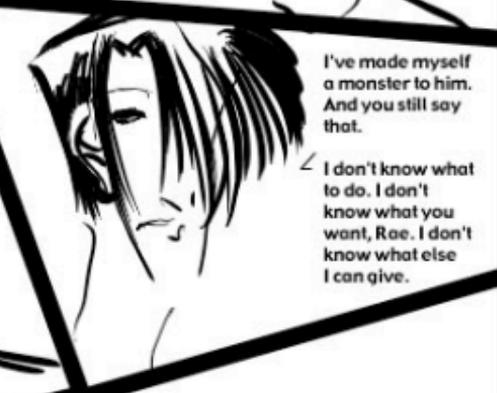
SHUT UP.

NOBODY else was EVER supposed to come between us!



If it's not working it's because YOU won't LET it work.

You're so fucking SELFISH. What about ME?! What about MY happiness?!



I've made myself a monster to him. And you still say that.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what you want, Rae. I don't know what else I can give.



Leave me alone. I'm sick of the both of you. I tried to make it work-I did the worst possible thing I could think of-I've made myself into a villain-for NOTHING. The hatred I have for myself now far outweighs the love I have for EITHER of you.

Go away, LEAVE ME ALONE.



Why am I
crying? ↘

I'm responsible.
Why am I
crying? ➤



How did it come
to this? Is there
any reason? ↙

There's
no one...
no one to ask. ↖

Why? ➤
WHY?!



Why does
it have to
be so HARD? ↖



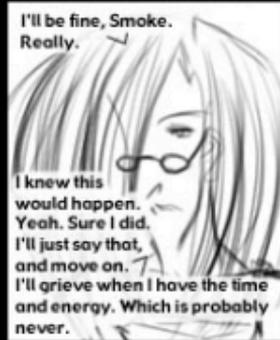
Do you want to cry?

Fuck you.



Want me to rub your tummy?

... maybe later.



I'll be fine, Smoke. Really.

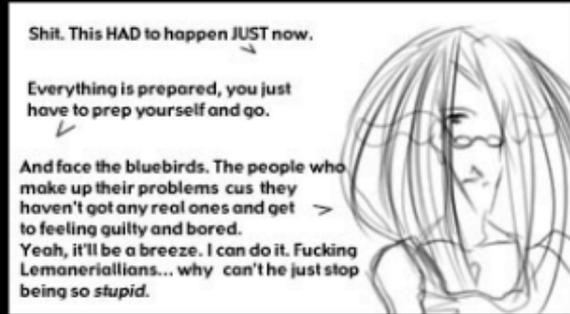
I knew this would happen. Yeah. Sure I did. I'll just say that, and move on. I'll grieve when I have the time and energy. Which is probably never.



One cloud gets lonely, Fern.

Lay it on, then.

That summit meeting is tomorrow. Cal is not going. You have to represent us.



Shit. This HAD to happen JUST now.

Everything is prepared, you just have to prep yourself and go.

And face the bluebirds. The people who make up their problems cus they haven't got any real ones and get to feeling guilty and bored. Yeah, it'll be a breeze. I can do it. Fucking Lemanerialians... why can't he just stop being so stupid.

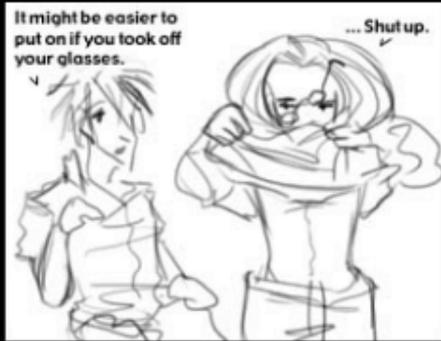


Takes all kinds to make a world.

Yeah. Me whining won't get us anywhere. "sigh"

Let's get going.

I need a long sleeve shirt... this one is clean..sort of.



It might be easier to put on if you took off your glasses.

... Shut up.

Two days
later, at
Tower.

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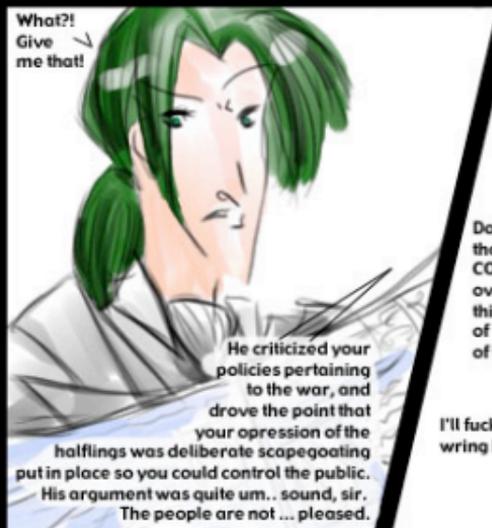
What a beautiful morning. What news, Lowell?

Obviously, no, if I'm asking you what's new, Lowell.

Sir.. have you seen the newspapers?



Well um. Sir, that summit meeting yesterday? Moranierial delivered a speech to the public in your absence. It was ... unflattering.



What?! Give me that!

He criticized your policies pertaining to the war, and drove the point that your oppression of the halfings was deliberate scapegoating put in place so you could control the public. His argument was quite um.. sound, sir. The people are not ... pleased.

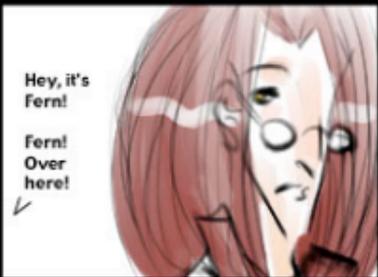
.....That's it. I'm going to kill him. This is the last straw. I'm SICK of them intruding in my affairs.

Doesn't he SEE that I could lose CONTROL over EVERY thing because of this sort of thing?!

I'll fucking wring his neck!

I'll take the maniacal gleam in your eye as an order to summon public relations.





Hey, it's Fern!

Fern!
Over here!



Hellooo!

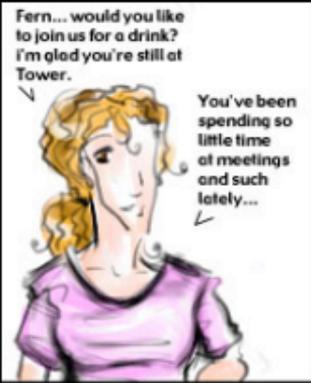


Capital speech yesterday, Fern. I applaud you.

Mm... Yeah, that.



I don't think any of the 'mentals agree with Lem's current policies. In dire need of being amended. You certainly frothed up the crowd. The public's opinion is now quite clear. It would have been difficult for us to stand up because of our positions, but you took up the torch. An all around amazing show of rhetoric.



Fern... would you like to join us for a drink? I'm glad you're still at Tower.

You've been spending so little time of meetings and such lately...



Sorry..Been busy.Sure, I'll have a drink.

Heh. I doubt it'll be the last one I have today.



Why are you looking at me that way?



You two got so hangdog all of a sudden. Lighten up.

Fern...

We've heard about your current.. situation. The abuse.

We're worried.



Now wait a second. ABUSE?

Who the fuck told you I was being ABUSED?

What the hell do YOU know about ABUSE?



You let ME do all the dirty work, and then turn around and rub it in my face?! Is that it?!



All YOU have to worry about is whether your frigging MINIONS fluffed your PILLOW right or not. I am NOT your PEER, you condescending prig, all you fucks are the same -- ASS kissers.

Oh, nothing, except the fact it's sentimental bullshit that won't come to anything.

I don't need your "concern" and self-satisfied bravado. Try to resolve it for yourselves that other people suffer more than you and there's nothing you can do but sit and watch. You'll maintain your own happy little shit life and be a lot less annoying.



Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going home.

Honestly, Fern! we're not trying to damage your pride!



We're just trying to help! We're concerned! What's wrong with that?



Oh good, Col, you're here.

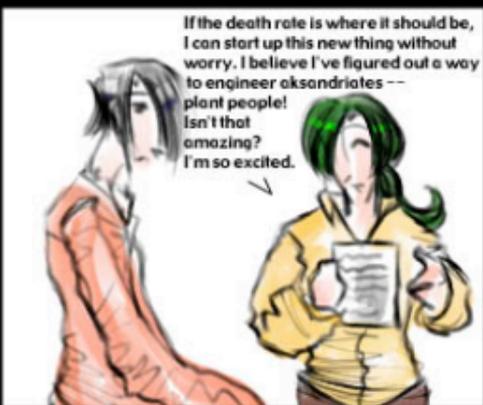


All the minions have turned in for the night, you needn't be nervous.

Come in, come in.



Hee, I've got a new project going. All I need is for you to double check these death reports for me.



If the death rate is where it should be, I can start up this new thing without worry. I believe I've figured out a way to engineer oksandriates -- plant people! Isn't that amazing? I'm so excited.



His thighs... his beautiful, pearly thighs.

He'll never let me touch them again.

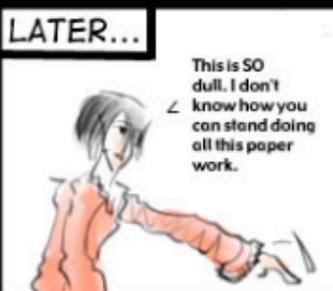


....uwuh?



..Sorry. The death reports?

Oh, yea, yea, they're right here...



LATER...

This is SO dull. I don't know how you can stand doing all this paper work.



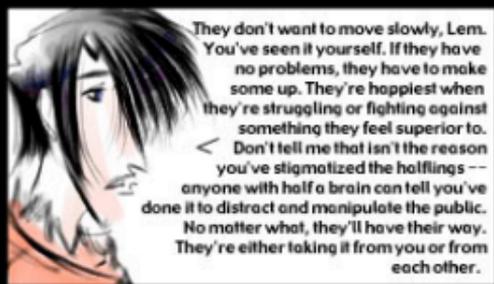
If I didn't, I wouldn't keep up with things. Crops would fail, people would starve.



Well..I've been trying to do that, slowly. People can't take care of themselves properly.

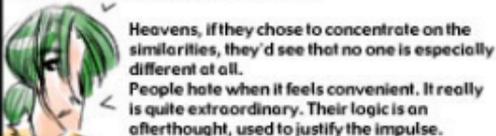
If you let the people do some of the work for themselves you wouldn't have to be responsible for it all.

I can't bear watching them make mistakes as it is...

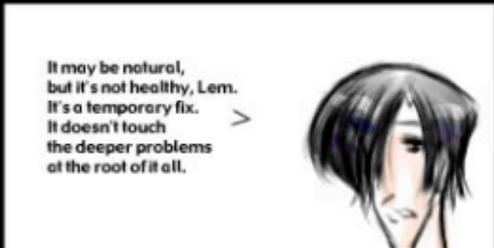


They don't want to move slowly, Lem. You've seen it yourself. If they have no problems, they have to make some up. They're hopplest when they're struggling or fighting against something they feel superior to. Don't tell me that isn't the reason you've stigmatized the halffings -- anyone with half a brain can tell you've done it to distract and manipulate the public. No matter what, they'll have their way. They're either taking it from you or from each other.

I had to resort to it, Col. There were pressing issues at hand & I was losing control. Anyway, it's not like I came up with it all by myself. I emphasized and extended on hatreds that have existed for a long time. When people are troubled, they concentrate on how others are different.



Heavens, if they chose to concentrate on the similarities, they'd see that no one is especially different at all. People hate when it feels convenient. It really is quite extraordinary. Their logic is an afterthought, used to justify the impulse.



It may be natural, but it's not healthy, Lem. It's a temporary fix. It doesn't touch the deeper problems at the root of it all.



I'm working on those problems, too! It's hard, you know. And anyway, since when are you a window onto the workings of the mortal soul? I thought you just filed them away in little boxes or something. Cal?



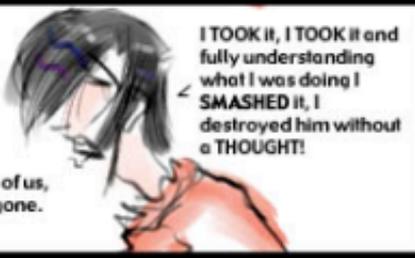
Cal!? Good heavens, what's the matter?

That's a good question, that is. What do I know?



Er-- Well, I was only teasing--

I broke his heart! He gave it to me, so that maybe it could beat for the both of us, since mine was gone.



I TOOK it, I TOOK it and fully understanding what I was doing I SMASHED it, I destroyed him without a THOUGHT!



Are you talking about Fern?

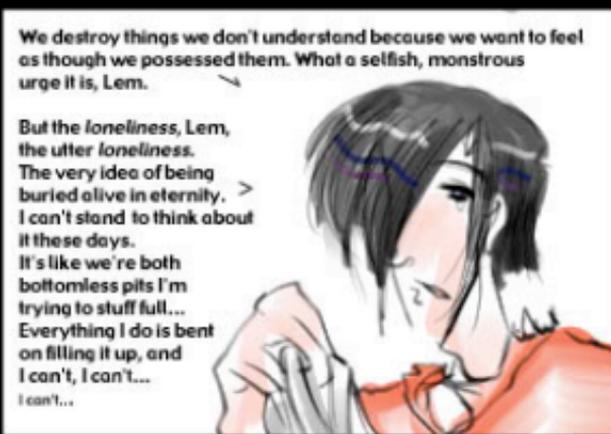


We know nothing, nothing of these creatures. We only know games, tricks, like children who play with magnets with no knowledge of why they attract. We are outside, Lem, outside of everything, and if we are allowed in for a visit we blunder about and trample their precious institutions like grasshoppers tear apart the webs of spiders. We are outside, in the cold, and we deserve it.



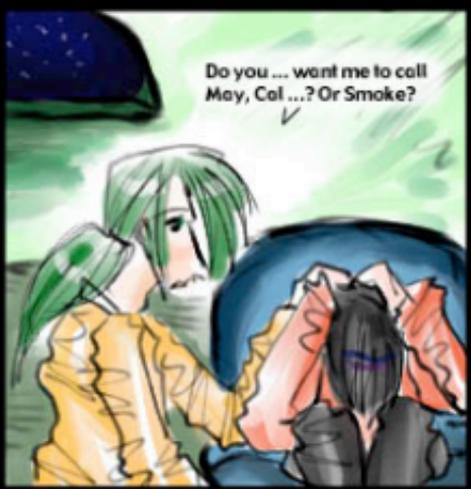
< Uh.. Cal, I really.. don't know what to say to that.

....here's a tissue?



We destroy things we don't understand because we want to feel as though we possessed them. What a selfish, monstrous urge it is, Lem.

But the loneliness, Lem, the utter loneliness. The very idea of being buried alive in eternity. I can't stand to think about it these days. It's like we're both bottomless pits I'm trying to stuff full... Everything I do is bent on filling it up, and I can't, I can't... I can't...



Do you ... want me to call May, Cal ...? Or Smoke?



No -- I'm sorry for being dreary -- please forget it. I have to go home.

I'm sorry.



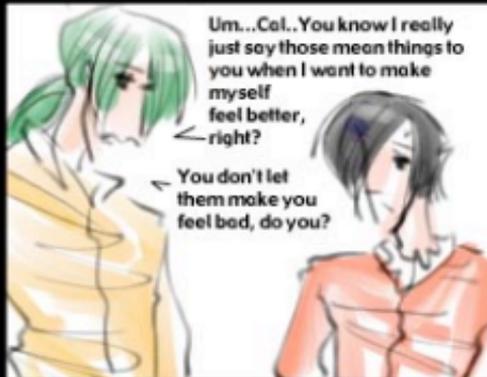
Wait, Cal..
Er, can't you
tell Fern
you're sorry?



It's not enough.. what would
it accomplish?
He'd just look
at me with
hatred in his
eyes...
I can't stand
to even look
at him... Me, of all
people, should
never have done
such a thing
to him.

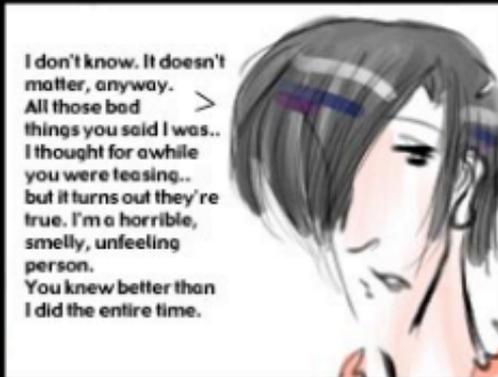


I still think it's better than doing
nothing...



Um...Cal.. You know I really
just say those mean things to
you when I want to make
myself
feel better,
right?

You don't let
them make you
feel bad, do you?



I don't know. It doesn't
matter, anyway.
All those bad
things you said I was..
I thought for awhile
you were teasing..
but it turns out they're
true. I'm a horrible,
smelly, unfeeling
person.
You knew better than
I did the entire time.



Oh. >

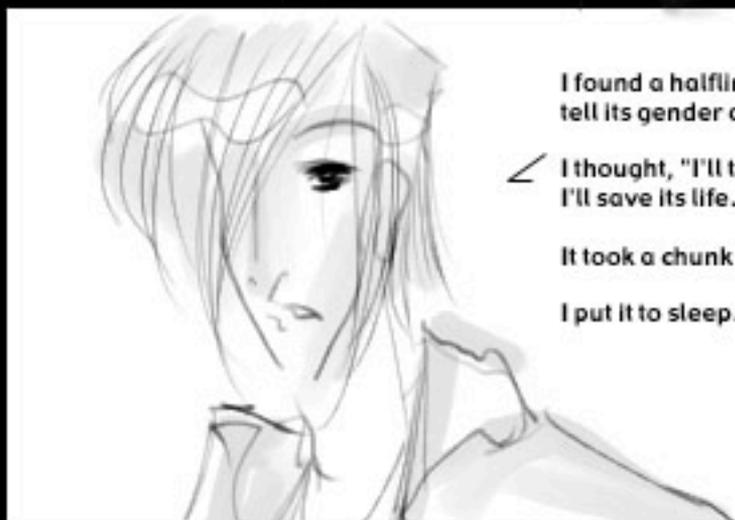
Huh.

Funny how things
turn out, I guess.

Mm.



I wonder if I should
say anything. Will
you just ignore me
again? I love playing
the idiot.

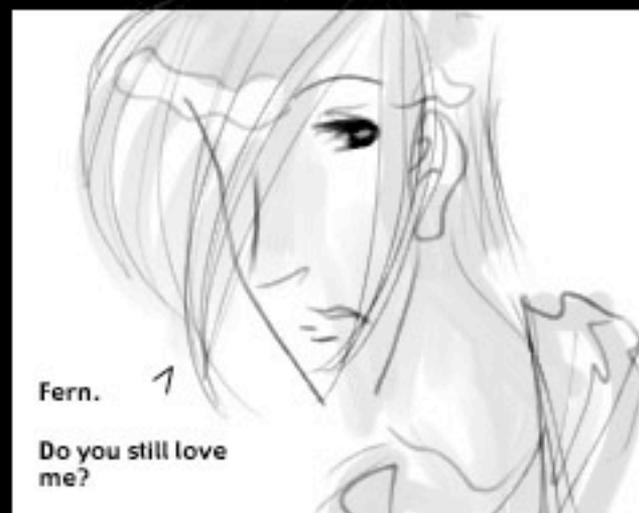


I found a halfling on the street on my way home. I couldn't tell its gender or its age, it was so emaciated.

I thought, "I'll take it home with me. I'll take care of it, I'll save its life."

It took a chunk out of my arm.

I put it to sleep.



Fern. 1
Do you still love
me?

THUD

WHAAATTTT?????

You..you have a lot of BALLS asking me that question, Cal.

How c-can you ask me that?! Huh?!

....Because I want to know whether you love me or not?

But -- BUT -- You just don't ASK me that after breaking up with me! It's not -- It's not -- SOMETHING!!!

...If you're trying to get me to feel sorry for you, you've got another thing coming.

You've made it perfectly clear you think I'm a boring, worthless idiot. It's unnecessary for you to continue to rub it in my face. I'm not going to blindly play your games any-more.

I don't want your pity..I didn't ask for it. I don't.. I don't want to hurt you, Fern. I want to protect you. I don't have the strength.. I tried, and I failed. But ... if you still care for me.. maybe I'll get enough strength... I know it's selfish.. I should be able to do it alone.. But I need you, Fern.

Cal..What are you talking about? Protect me from what?

YOU? Not strong enough? Excuse me, Cal, but it seems like you do most everything you want to, despite whatever consequences there may be. If you have too much of anything, it's strength.

Protect you from HIM -- he's --

I'll protect you... Figure out a way --

He's trying to get out I don't have enough time

I'll protect you -- I'll find a way -- I promise

C-cal --
Leggo-

Quiet. Sit still. I need to
think.

But--

Shhhhhh..

Where
is your
crestil?

Basil?
Around
my neck...

Give it to me.

..... all right.....

What sort of
world is this...

Where you
are driven to
do such horrible
things....

He doesn't love you,
Cal. Give it up.
Give him to me.
Let me out,
just for a little
bit. You'll see.
I'll make
everything
better.

It'll be just
you and me again...
happy... free.
Listen to me. Who
else would want you
but me? You and I belong
together.



Cal?! CAL!! TALK to me! Don't just stand there with
that look on your face! Give me something!
What's WRONG? Why won't you tell me
what's WRONG?



Just a little
more time --
just a little
more time and
it'll be okay --
I need to think--
please let
me thi --



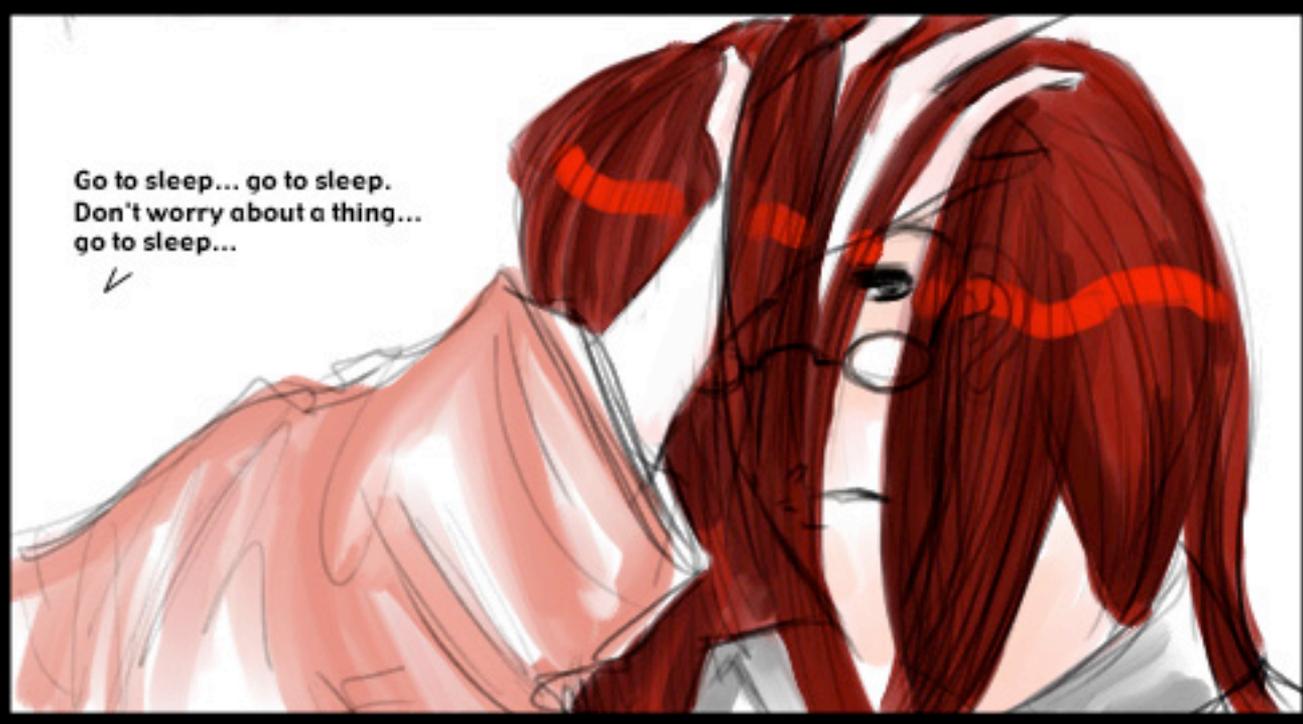
Make up your mind, Cal. I won't
wait for you. Make it up now.





Forget.. Forget I asked you that, Fern. ↘

Forget everything. I'll help you forget. Do me one last favor.



Go to sleep... go to sleep. Don't worry about a thing... go to sleep... ↘



I *thought* this trick would be useful one day.





What do you think you're doing?



I don't think I owe you anymore answers, Rae.

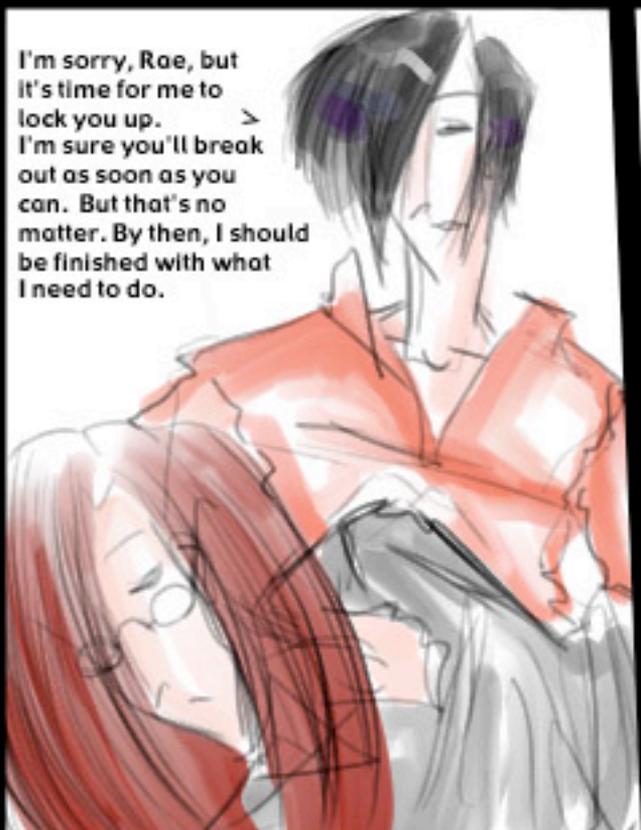
I'm not letting you have him. Get accustomed to the concept.



If you don't give him, I'll TAKE him. YOU seem to be the one misunderstanding the concept at work here.



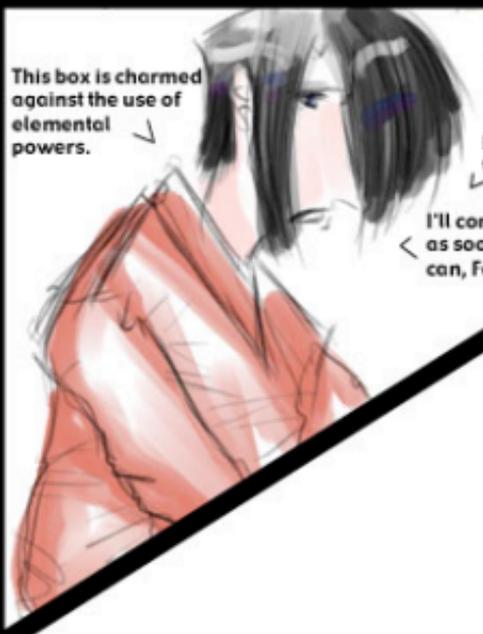
You're wrong. I'm putting him in a place where you won't be able to touch him. I know you're going to take control of me as soon as I let my guard down. I'm using the last energy I have for this.



I'm sorry, Rae, but it's time for me to lock you up. I'm sure you'll break out as soon as you can. But that's no matter. By then, I should be finished with what I need to do.



I'm warning you, Cal. Don't make it harder on yourself.



This box is charmed against the use of elemental powers.

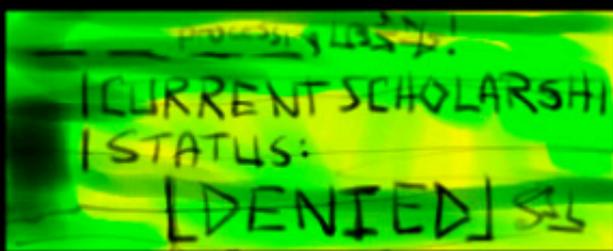
< This is the only place in the world where you can be safe from him.

I didn't want to resort to this... but...

< I'll come get you... as soon as I can, Fern.

I miss you.







^
God, I'm
hungry...



*rummage
rummage*



I have enough for a
phone call.

7



^
Last resort... I'll try to call
my parents.



click
Hello?



Hi Mom..
It's Eddie.

...Eddie? Oh my god...
Eddie, you know you're
not supposed to call.
Your father'll be furious
if he hears me --

I know, I know.. I'm sorry.. But
I need help, mom. They took
away my scholarship, I'm broke,
they'll take away my room soon
and I --

EDWARD! How could you LOSE
your scholarship?!

I fell sick, mom. I was out
of school for almost half
the semester, in the
hospital--

I'm so ashamed of you. We worked hard
to support you and this is how you repay
us.

I can get
the scholarship
back! I just need
a chance, I need
to rest awhile, get
something to ea-

What were
you in the
hospital
for? I hope
I don't get
any bills.
Oh dear,
you don't
have the
plague, do
you?

Please tell me you don't.
And I thought you were
working, you had that
book job --

I was laid off a long
time ago mom. I told
you in my last letter.

Well, what are
you asking for
my help for? You
have to get a
job. Life isn't
a buffet, you
know, Eddie.

Ma..ma for goddsokes, listen to me.. I'm
starving.. I don't have any money, I'm in the
big city.. I'm tired and scored and --

There you go
again, Edward.
You know, your
father and I took
you in as a baby
and raised you up
even though you
weren't our own, yet
you continue to demand, demand, demand!
We can only give so much, Edward!

Now I'm getting off
before your father hears
me. Eddie, PLEASE don't
call this number again!
And your father said
he'll tear up your letters
from now on, so don't
send those either.
You'll be fine, just get
something to eat and
rest up. Wear your
good clothes, and go
get yourself a job. If
you just applied your-
self for once, you'd
find you don't have
to parasitize your
father and me. Take
care of yourself, Eddie!
Be a good boy.

Okay, mom.



You're not very encouraging, mouse.

Not even the vermin are surviving in this place.



This is it ... the last of the rice.



I can make this work.. right?
I can wait it out.. something will happen.. a stroke of luck...



I'm going to sleep in the meantime.

I'm so tired...

*I woke up days later
to a changed world.*



*I had lied to my mother
without realizing it.*



groan

Nng...
what...



My... my skin....



YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE:
AN ANNOUNCEMENT FROM
THE CITY HEALTH AUTHORITY

That
noise..



THIS AREA HAS BEEN DECLARED
QUARANTINED. THOSE WITH SPECIAL PAPERS
PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE PERIMETER
GATES IMMEDIATELY. RESIDENTS PLEASE
REMAIN INSIDE YOUR HOMES UNTIL FURTHER
NOTICE. ONCE AGAIN, RESIDENTS
PLEASE REMAIN INSIDE YOUR
HOMES.



They're locking
the area down!

I'm not
dead!
Don't lock
me in!



I have
to get
OUT of
here!

Why is it
so warm...the
boiler was
turned off
months ago...

I can barely
walk...what
did they mean
about "gates..?"



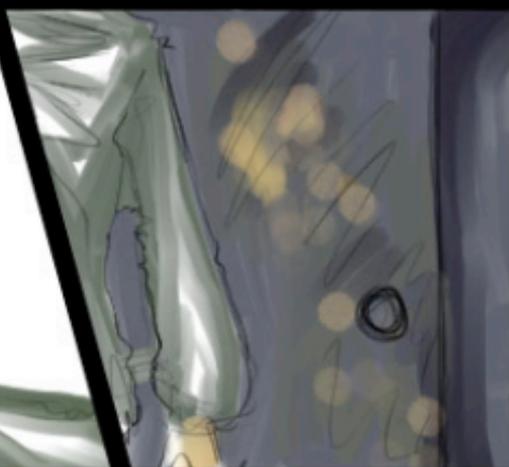


The door to the lobby is closed...

that's odd...

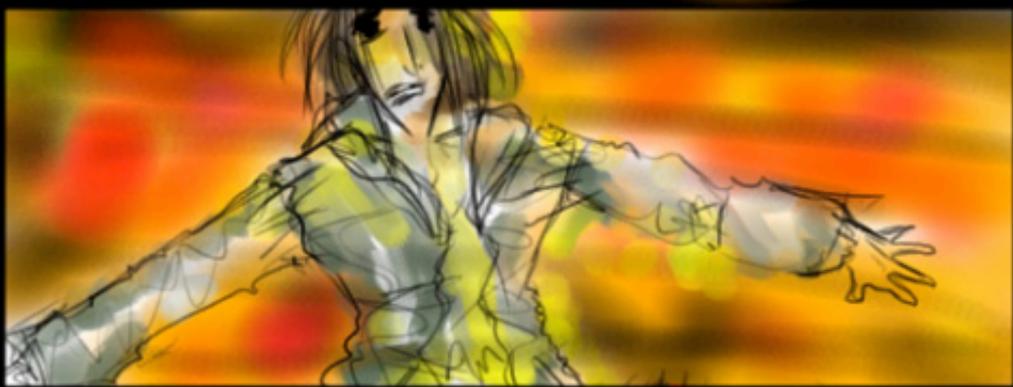


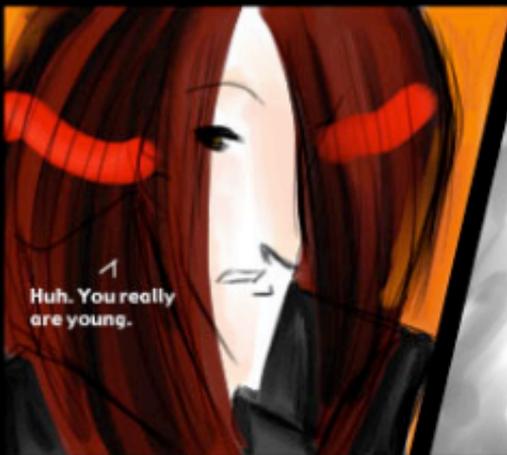
....it's hot..



↑
I-is someone out there?







↑
Huh. You really are young.



←
P-please.. mister... don't hurt me.. please...



↑
Heh, kid, I plan to. I plan to.



GRAB

↑
Do you have ANY idea what pain you've caused?



Please! I d-don't even know what you're talking about!!



Hum. No, I suppose you wouldn't. Perhaps that's better, anyway. Ignorance isn't a sin so much as something to enjoy while you still have it.



Y-you're not going to kill me then?

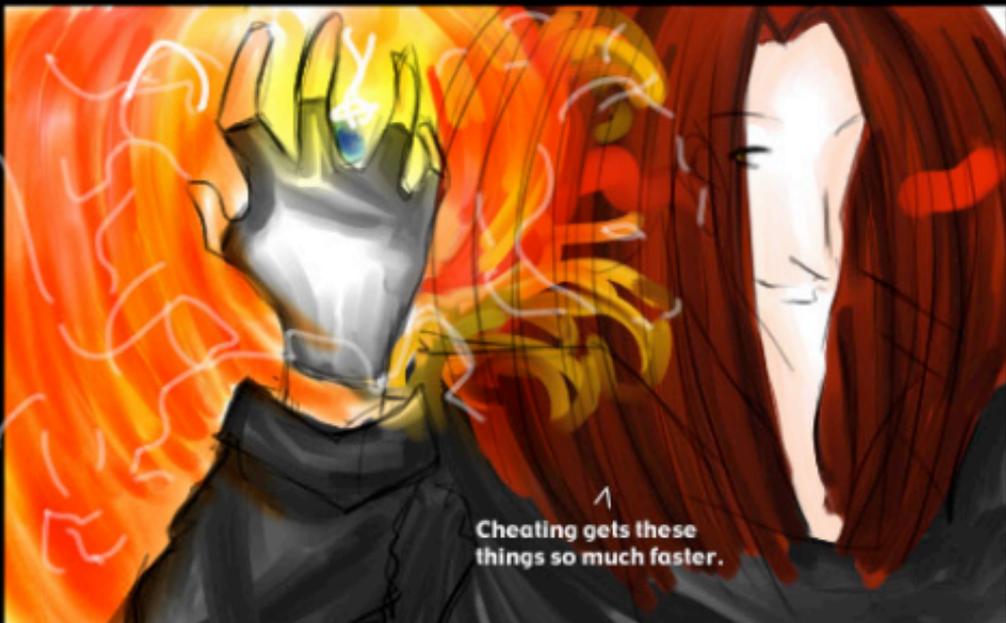
∨ No, I'm going to kill you less painfully.



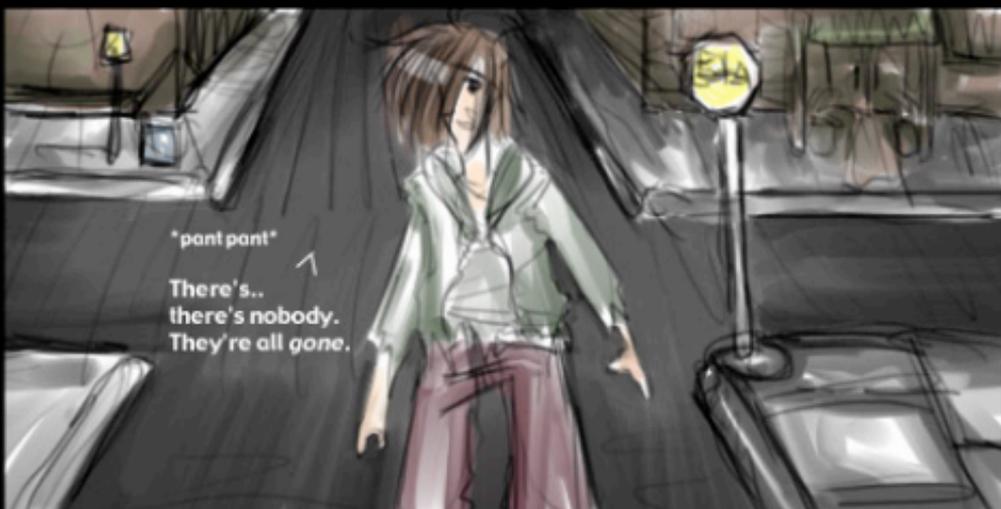
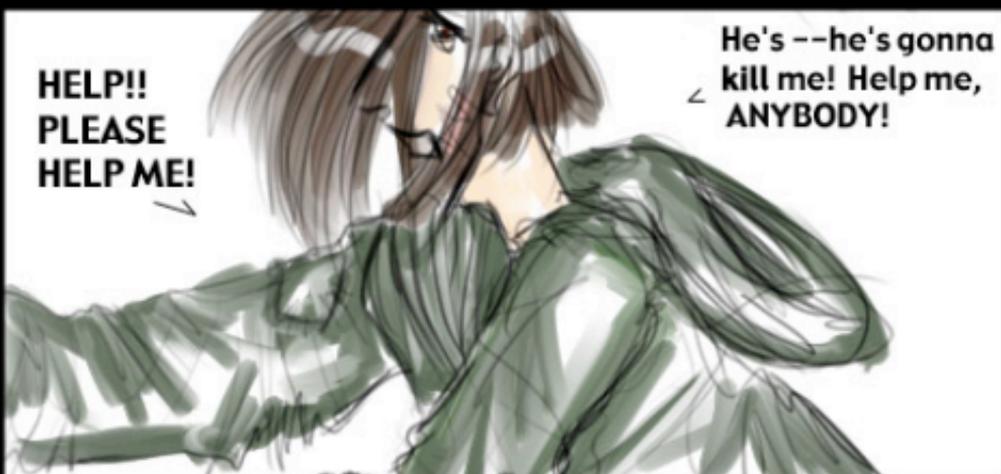
I would run if I were you.

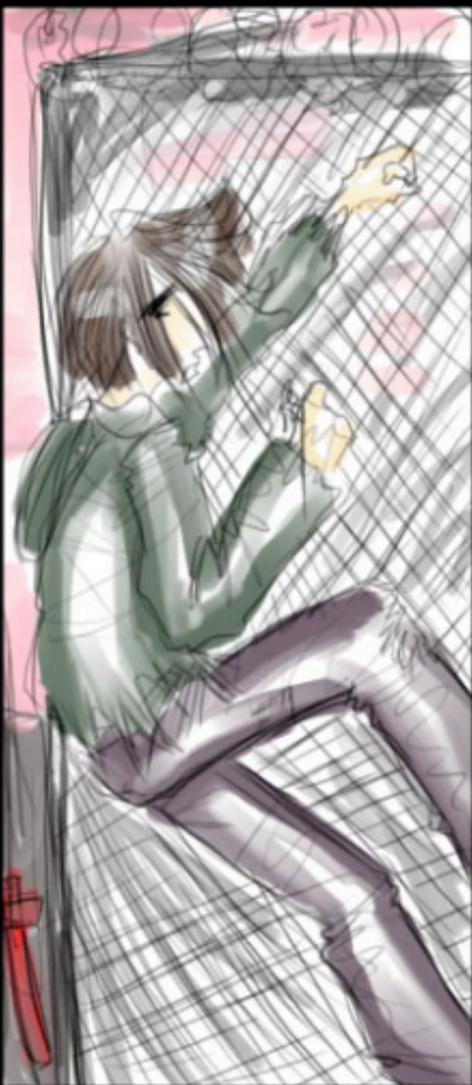


whimper



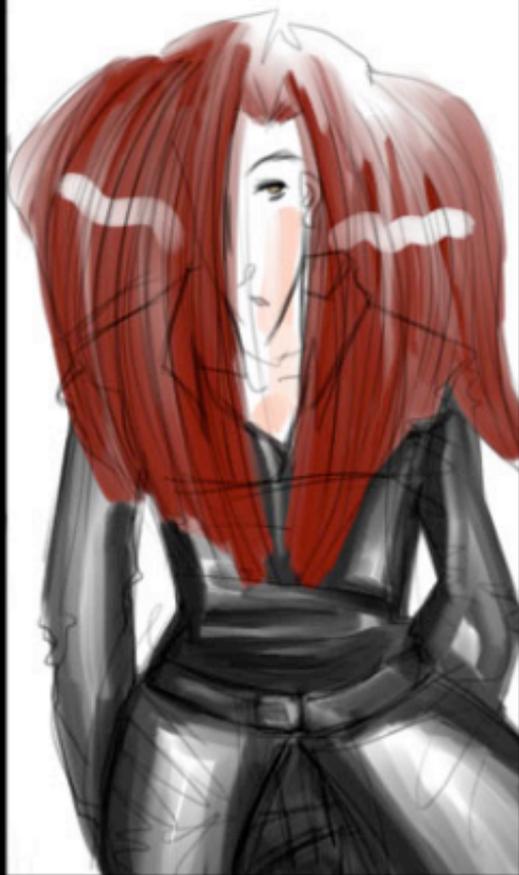
∧ Cheating gets these things so much faster.

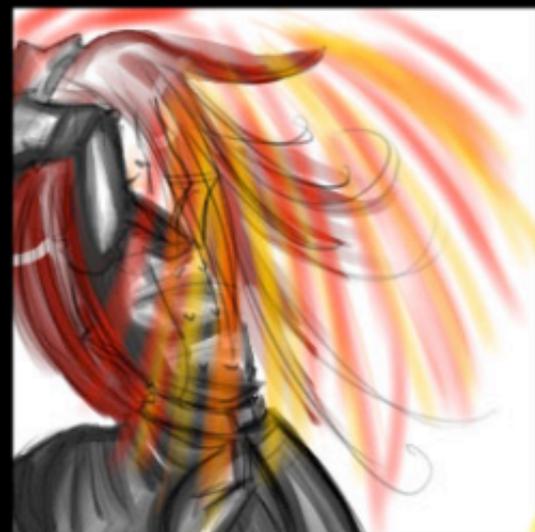
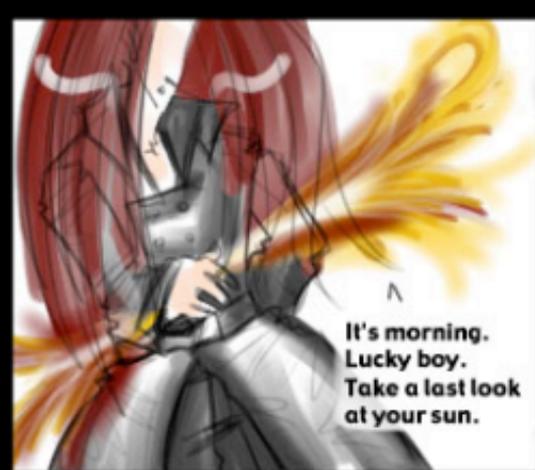




Tch. What are you planning to do, *float* over the razor wire?

✓







I ... I don't want to die...



Tough shit.

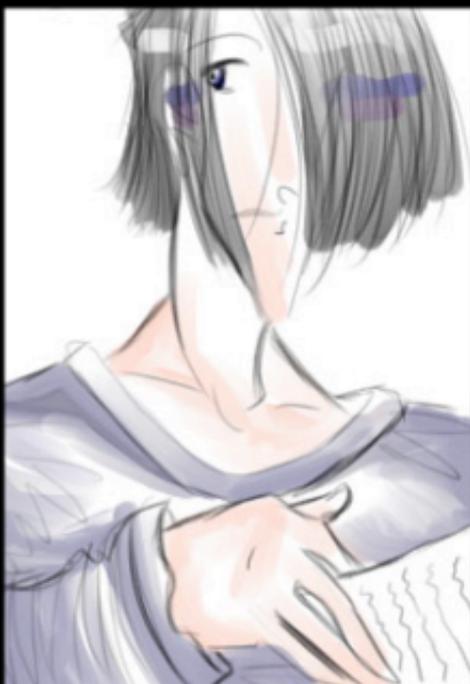
lublub-
lublub
lublub
lublub
lub lub

Where am I
what's that
noise...



Uh...excuse
me...

Where am I?



Did I say something
wrong...?





FERN!!! FERN HELP! HE'S AWAKE!



.....strange guy



But come to think about it, he's not the only strange thing going on.

Why am I ... gray?!



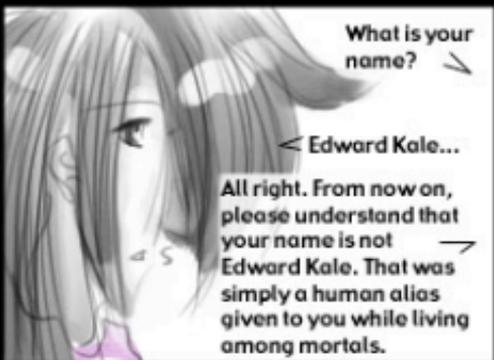
Awake at last, hey? →

Cal is shy. Don't mind him. I'm Fern.



Erm...okay... Who are you guys? ↓

I'll explain. Just answer my questions and be patient. You're not in danger. ↓



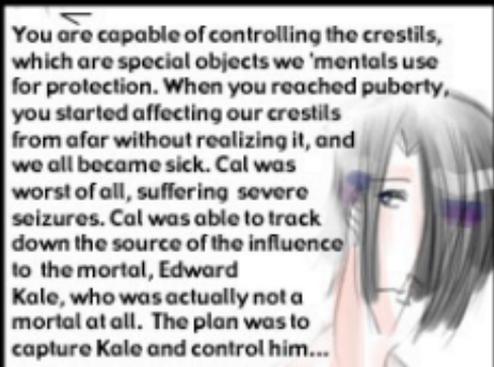
What is your name? →

← Edward Kale...

All right. From now on, please understand that your name is not Edward Kale. That was simply a human alias given to you while living among mortals. →



Although your culture has discredited the existence of elementals, they do actually exist. If you were given any sort of cultured upbringing you would remember myths about the elementals from your childhood. We are two of those elementals. *sigh* How shall I explain this... You were born with certain... powers. >



You are capable of controlling the crestils, which are special objects we 'mentals use for protection. When you reached puberty, you started affecting our crestils from afar without realizing it, and we all became sick. Cal was worst of all, suffering severe seizures. Cal was able to track down the source of the influence to the mortal, Edward Kale, who was actually not a mortal at all. The plan was to capture Kale and control him...



But as you may or may not remember, I disobeyed orders. I didn't want to wait any longer. I took the information Cal had on Kale and murdered him. ↘

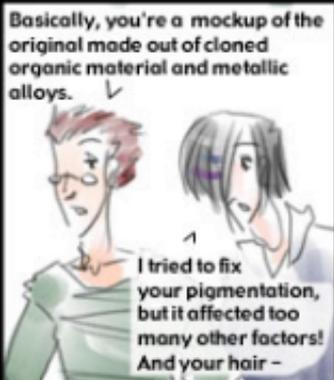


Yeah, what next...um. I killed you, but Cal was able to scrounge some of his original DNA from the site..

He spent the next several years trying to reconstruct something akin to your original. What was most important was recovering your powers.



It took a lot of false starts but at last he designed a cybergenetic model that was designed after your original, but with modifications that allowed it to assume the original's crestil powers...his "essence," if you will.



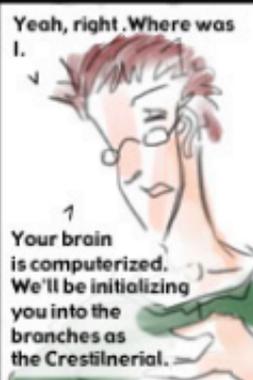
Basically, you're a mockup of the original made out of cloned organic material and metallic alloys.

I tried to fix your pigmentation, but it affected too many other factors! And your hair -



Am I telling this goddamn story or not, Cal?

Sorry.



Yeah, right. Where was I.

Your brain is computerized. We'll be initializing you into the branches as the Crestilnerial.



That's it. I'm not explaining anymore.

sigh



Okay. That all makes sense. May I use a phone?



...Do we still have a phone?

I thought we were keeping it on the lawnmower.

I think it's in the microwave.

No, that's the fax machine.



Okay. Come this way, please.



I'll clear a spot on the table for you.. Here's the phone..



Thank you.. do you mind if you..

No problem. Cal and I will be in the living room if you need us.



I think this is a good occasion for 911...



Allo, you've reached Necco Express! How may I assist you?



Can you help me? I've been kidnapped.. and I think brain-washed. They made me think I'm gray.. and gave me Super-Rogaine or something... I need help..

Good heavens! That simply won't do. I could call the Guard for you. What is your present location?

I'm not sure.. I'll go to the front of the house and look for the address! I'll be right back.



He thinks this house has an address.



BWAHAHAHAHAHA



Ah, youth.

Aheh. As though anything could be THAT reasonable to assume.

There doesn't seem to be a number or anything.. We're in the middle of a forest, I think. But it's such a big house!



The redhead is named "Fern" and the other is "Cal," that's all I --- huh? Wait, what did you say?!



Hello?! HELLO? Are you there?

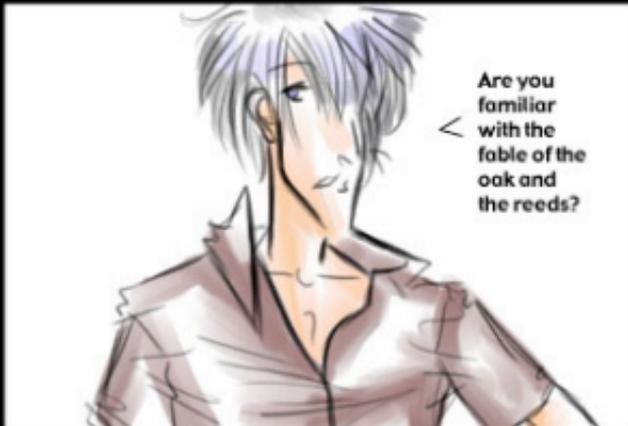


click

U-uh ... hi.



Are you familiar with the fable of the oak and the reeds?

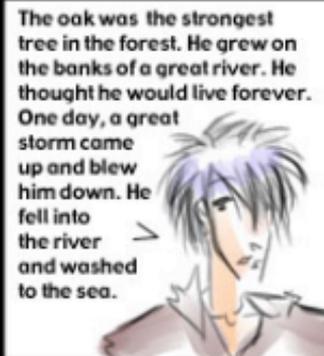


Where'd he come from..?



...Er...
No...can't say I am...

The oak was the strongest tree in the forest. He grew on the banks of a great river. He thought he would live forever. One day, a great storm came up and blew him down. He fell into the river and washed to the sea.



There on the shore, he saw some reeds growing. He asked them how they had weathered the storm and he had not. They said, "Because we bent to the wind and allowed it to pass over us. Because you resisted, it was able to snap your trunk."



You are a reed. Understand? You are a reed.



All done with the phone?

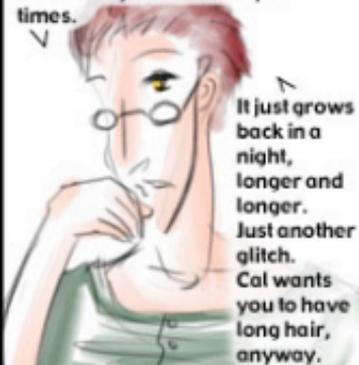
I'm a reed.



Go ahead and sit down.
Want something to
drink? I think we have
some root beer.

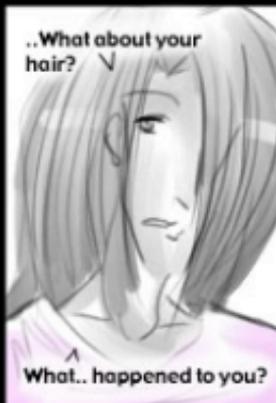


We already tried it. Multiple
times.



It just grows
back in a
night,
longer
and
longer.
Just another
glitch.
Cal wants
you to have
long hair,
anyway.

..What about your
hair?



What.. happened to you?

I don't suppose I can get
all this hair cut.



Do you really
want to know
the answer
to that question?



Don't tell me
if it's private.
I just want to
know if it's
my fault.



It has nothing
to do with you
and everything
to do with me
being an ass.



Come on,
I'll show
you where
you can
sleep.



Somewhere a little
more cozy than the
infirmary.

What am I doing here...and who am I? I'm not Edward.. or Mid.. he said I was a "mock up." Am I fake?

Everything is so surreal...

close

He's not happy Fern. He's sad. Why is this? What did you do to make him sad?

I told you not to give him the original memories. He can't possibly be happy now, no matter what I say.

WELL, it wouldn't have been necessary at ALL to replace him if **SOMEbody** hadn't **KILLED** him.

Get in here and take your clothes off, NOW.

Despite those trifling imperfections, that boy is everything you're not. Young, innocent, graceful, delicate, beautiful.. He doesn't just destroy brainlessly, like you do. He creates.

Are you jealous, Fern? Tell me.

WHUMP

ANSWER me when I ask you a question, Fern.

No. I'm not jealous.

You're lying. But it doesn't matter. I'll get the reply I want eventually.

Well, you'll just have to be quiet, then, won't you?

Cal, think about this. Do you really want to hurt me while your new plaything is sleeping just down the hall?



You're burning daylight, kid.

AAAH!!

SMACK



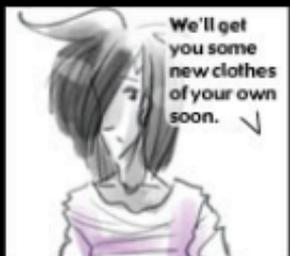
C'mon. I don't get up at this hour for no reason. We have work to do.



Good guess. It's 7. Here are some fresh clothes.



What hour is it, anyway?
What does it feel like?
One?



We'll get you some new clothes of your own soon.



Fern...? Um.. My name is Midnight? I realized last night ... I know things .. I didn't know I knew.. I think that's what I mean.



Cal input some things for you, so you might experience quite a bit of that. Midnight is indeed your name.

Sounds like the name of a stripper or something.. T_T;

Heh. Don't worry. It's an honorable name in this culture.



These are uh ... a bit big.

So ... if you guys are what you say you are.. It means you're millions of years old, right?

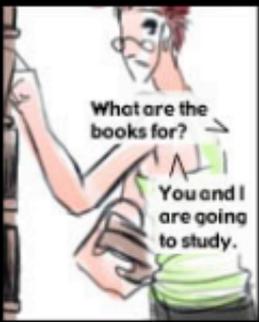


Well.. I'm 2000 years old. Cal is a lot older. But yeah, we're pretty old.

Hum, I guess those clothes will have to do for now.



He acts as though nothing happened last night...



What are the books for?

You and I are going to study.



Bleghh... What for? I never got very good grades...

Grades are bullshit.

You have to know a lot of things before you become Crestinerial. Cal wants me to tutor you.



It's nice out. Let's sit in the yard.

Wait a sec, my pants keep falling down...

So ah.. What sorts of things do I have to learn before I become the Crestilwhosis? What will my job be?



You'll fulfill various roles.. most importantly, you'll tend to the 'mentals' medical needs.



Medical needs? But can't you guys just heal up right away?

If we're strong enough. It's more complicated than you might think. You'll need to study crestis decantation, their uses, history, everything a doctor would know and more.

Oh..

To put it briefly, you will be the elementals' most capable doctor.

Hmm.. So... Would I be looking after you?

Would I take that scar off for you once I'm experienced enough?



..Does it hurt?

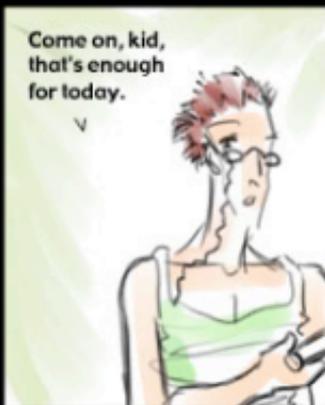


In this particular instance, you can't help. But with a lot of other things, yes.





So I studied.. and you know, it wasn't bad. I memorized those books so quickly, it was uncanny. I actually had to slow myself down at times so I could ruminate over the stuff a bit more...
To be honest, it was kind of disturbing. Before I knew it, the sun was going down.



Come on, kid, that's enough for today.



This is kind of freaking me out..

Sorry. We can go a little more slowly. But you'll get used to it.



peek



Well, are you gonna just sit there and block the door or are you gonna let us in within the next century?

scuffle



He had a black eye! What.. what happened to him?

I did.



You mean---?! You didn't get --

If it's any of your business, no, I didn't.



CONFUSION

I don't understand these guys at all.

These guys just don't fit into any kind of stereotype. Sometimes they're like friends, other times like lovers, and yet they seem to hate each other all the time. Always so .. tense..



It's like they don't know what to make of each other. **NOBODY** is going to make sense of their relationship until they make some sense of it for themselves..



Erf.. This damn hair. I need to do something with it. It's driving me crazy.

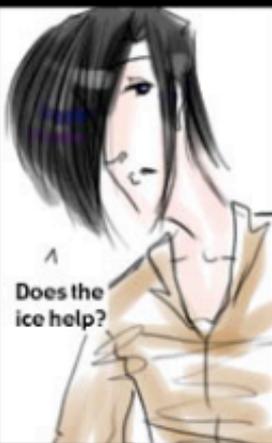
meanwhile....



crakakakak

thud thud thud

Sssss...OW.
anh....
damnit..



Does the ice help?

...
Yes, when it hurts, ice helps.

What are you going to do now, take all access to ice away from me?



Ssh. Let me see.

How long has it been like this?

It comes and goes.

Yeah, sure. Fine. We'll sell tickets.



Well.. It'll be gone in the morning.

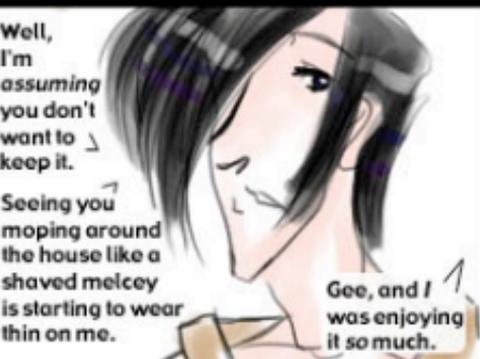
You're lifting the curse? Just like that?



Well, I'm assuming you don't want to keep it.

Seeing you moping around the house like a shaved melcey is starting to wear thin on me.

Gee, and I was enjoying it so much.



Fern, I'm sorry to burst in like this, but I DEMAND > some answers!

You're not blowing me off this time, I have a right to know!



Oh. That's.... a lot of liquor bottles. Wow.

I can give you some answers if you want them.

Good. What's that thing on Fern's face?



That scar is part of a curse Cal put on Fern as punishment for killing your original.

It was meant to disfigure and partially cripple him. Cal cut off his hair so he couldn't hide the scar.

Consider it an elemental form of "grounding." Fern hasn't left the house on his own business since Cal started work on your technology.

< So it WAS my fault...

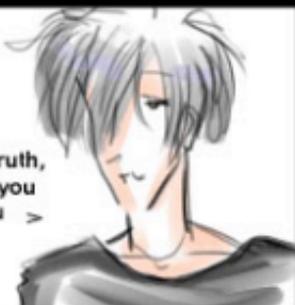


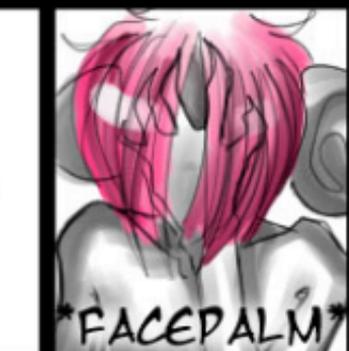
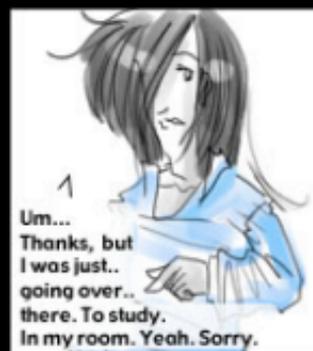
Not really. >
< But it IS ...

You asked for the truth, and I'm giving it to you straight. Either you believe me or you don't. It wasn't your fault.

You guys are all so scary.

As we've been told many times.





What the hell is **WRONG** with you?! **SHINY THINGS?** Cal, newsflash. You are the **ONLY PERSON** in the entire fucking **WORLD** who gives a flying fuck about shiny things.

AGH I am so **SICK** of being **STUCK** in here, I can't even so much as **JERK OFF** by myself. Everything is **YOU, YOU, YOU**, all the **FUCKING** time, shinies and pretty flowers and your **DEAD FUCKING ANIMALS**. What would I give for just **FIVE MINUTES REST** from your **CRAMPED, STUPID** little skull.

Are you sympathetic?! Do you try to make it easier? **NO!** You **SIT** there and **WHIMPER**. "I'm too scared! I'm too shy!" Oh, how **CONVENIENT** for you. You weren't **SHY** when you were banging **FERN** but I become interested in someone and suddenly you're absolutely fucking **WORTHLESS**.



Mid is different --

Damn right he's **DIFFERENT**. Things are going to go **MY** way and **NOW**. I never realized how fucking **DULL** you were until I had to sit in your head for countless centuries.

Do you have **ANY** idea how unnerving this is for me? Or are you too busy fantasizing about reflective objects?

I ... I don't know how .. to ... to talk to him .. If I did, I would do it right away...but I'm scared he'll end up hating me... I don't wanna ruin it f-for you, Rae...

Then **LEARN** how, read a fucking book or something! You've got enough of them lying around! **ASK** somebody, even! Do I have to explain every little fucking thing to you?

Sheez. If it weren't for me, you'd still be in a closet somewhere letting a nillit lord it over you.

I let you take the curse off Fern, but only because if he's out of the house and drunk, he won't be getting in my way every second.

You **OWE** me this, Cal. If you don't do this, you're no brother of mine.



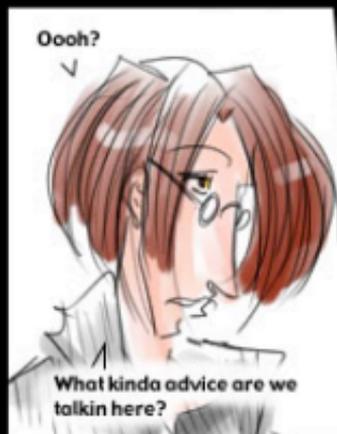
[back from a night out]



Fern... I know you just got home.. But I wonder if I could ask your advice about something.. It's .. kind of weird.



I've been trying for months now.. I'm at the end of my rope..



Oooh?

What kinda advice are we talkin here?



I waswonderingifyou'd helpmewooMid.



Eheheh. Surre I'll help ya.

Why dincha ask before?

Well... I thought.. you'd react... negatively.



FERN!!



..... Whherre did that wall come from?



You're drunk, Fern. Bedtime.

Notttt.....drunk, damnit. n' I give GOOD advise when 'm drunk.



Smoke...? Smoke,
wake up...please..
Smoke?



There's...there's something
wrong with me.

What is it?



My back...
I noticed something strange
before, but I wasn't sure what
it was, me, or one of the animals,
or a spell, or what...

Can you
see anything
wrong?

Are you sure??
I was positive
there was
something...

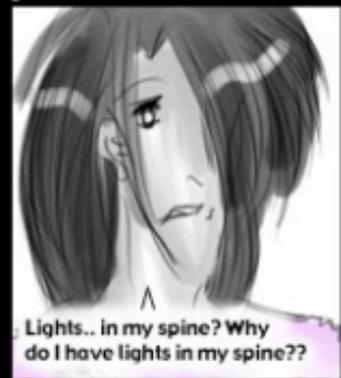
You look like you've
always looked.

No.

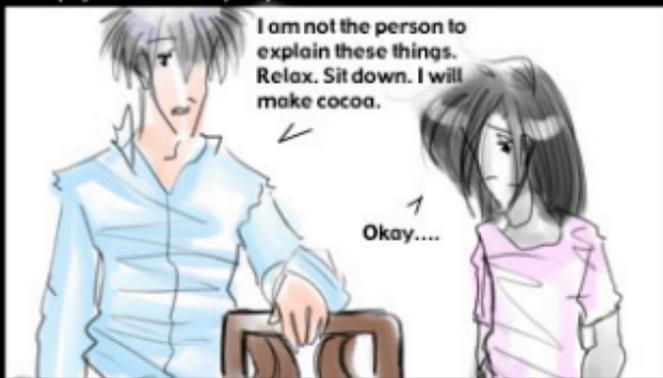
If by "unusual" you mean
the lights in your vertebrae,
yes, they're still there.

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME
IN THE FIRST PLACE?!

How have
I always
looked?
Is there
something
unusual
about me?



Lights.. in my spine? Why do I have lights in my spine??



I am not the person to explain these things. Relax. Sit down. I will make cocoa.

Okay....

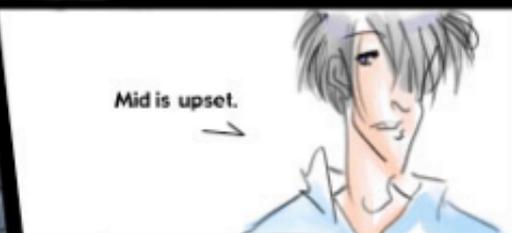


Lots of milk in mine, please. And a mild sedative. T_T

Deep breaths.



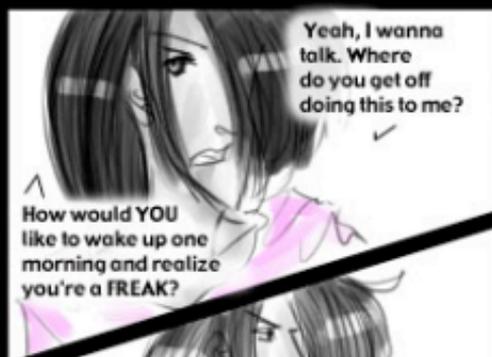
You two are awake? What's the matter?



Mid is upset.

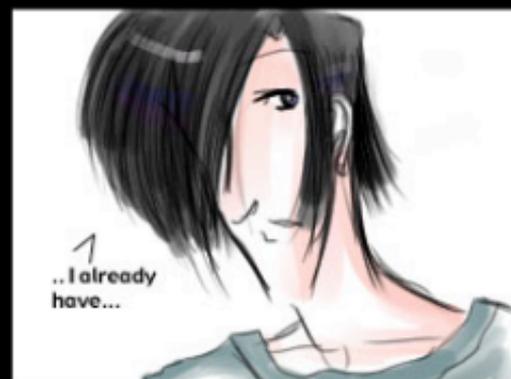


Ooh. Okay. Mid, do you want to talk..?



Yeah, I wanna talk. Where do you get off doing this to me?

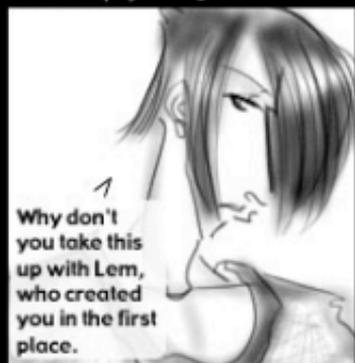
How would YOU like to wake up one morning and realize you're a FREAK?



.. I already have...



Then you should have known not to do it to someone else, you selfish prick.



Why don't you take this up with Lem, who created you in the first place.

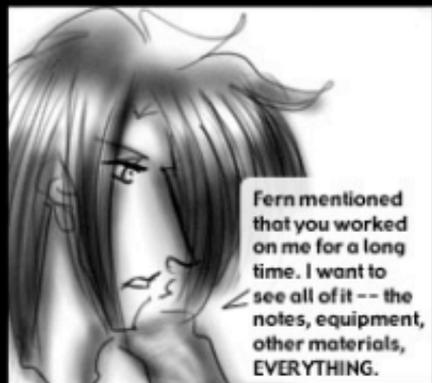
Lem is different. He doesn't try to recreate something impossible to copy.



Life is temporary, but at least it always moves on, never turns back, always progresses. It doesn't recreate its past mistakes.



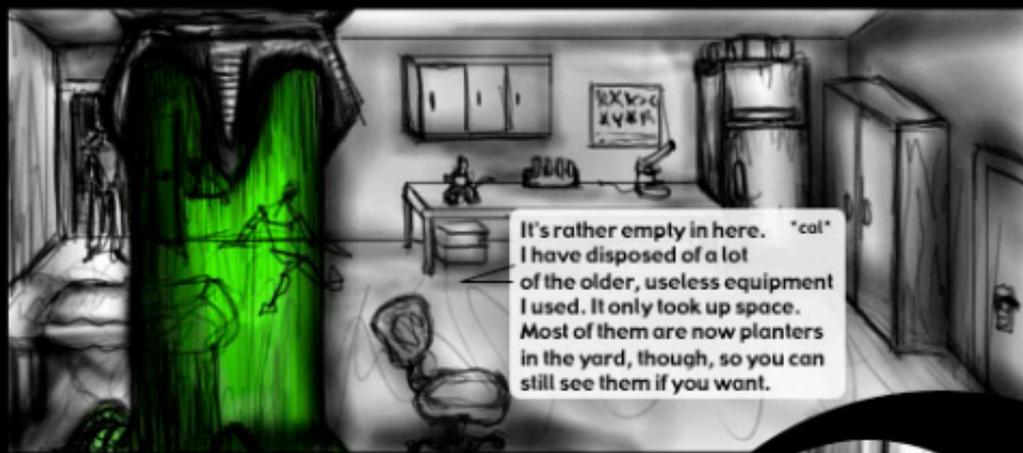
Unfortunately, I did not have that option open to me. Remember, the reason we cloned you at all was for your POWERS. Only you or a facsimile of you would yield what we wanted.



Fern mentioned that you worked on me for a long time. I want to see all of it -- the notes, equipment, other materials, EVERYTHING.

If that is what you want, that is what you shall have.

Follow me.



It's rather empty in here. I have disposed of a lot of the older, useless equipment I used. It only took up space. Most of them are now planters in the yard, though, so you can still see them if you want.



Um. I don't think that will be necessary.

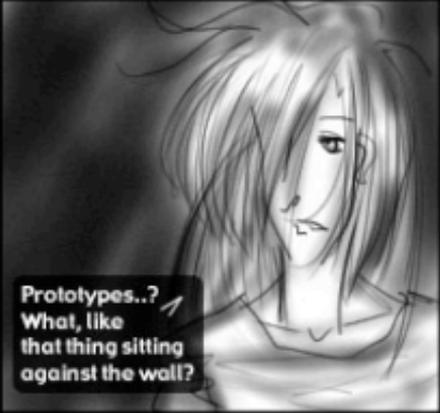
I remember this place...I woke up here. What's that door lead to?



Storage.

Storage of what?

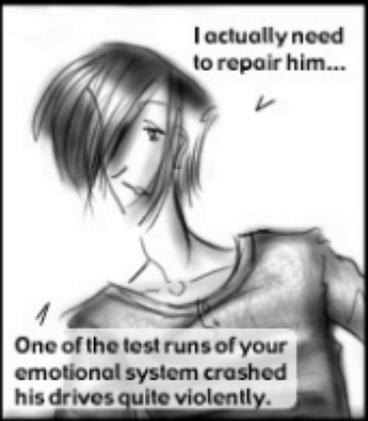
Prototypes.



Prototypes..?
What, like
that thing sitting
against the wall?



Jalopy? Yes and no.
I test-run all my new
programs on him.
He's an old robot,
but fairly versatile.
He wouldn't be too
much of a loss if a
new program corrupted.
I ran several of
your systems on
him first, before
testing them with
the prototypes.



I actually need
to repair him...

One of the test runs of your
emotional system crashed
his drives quite violently.



You're a regular
Dr Frankenstein,
you know
that?

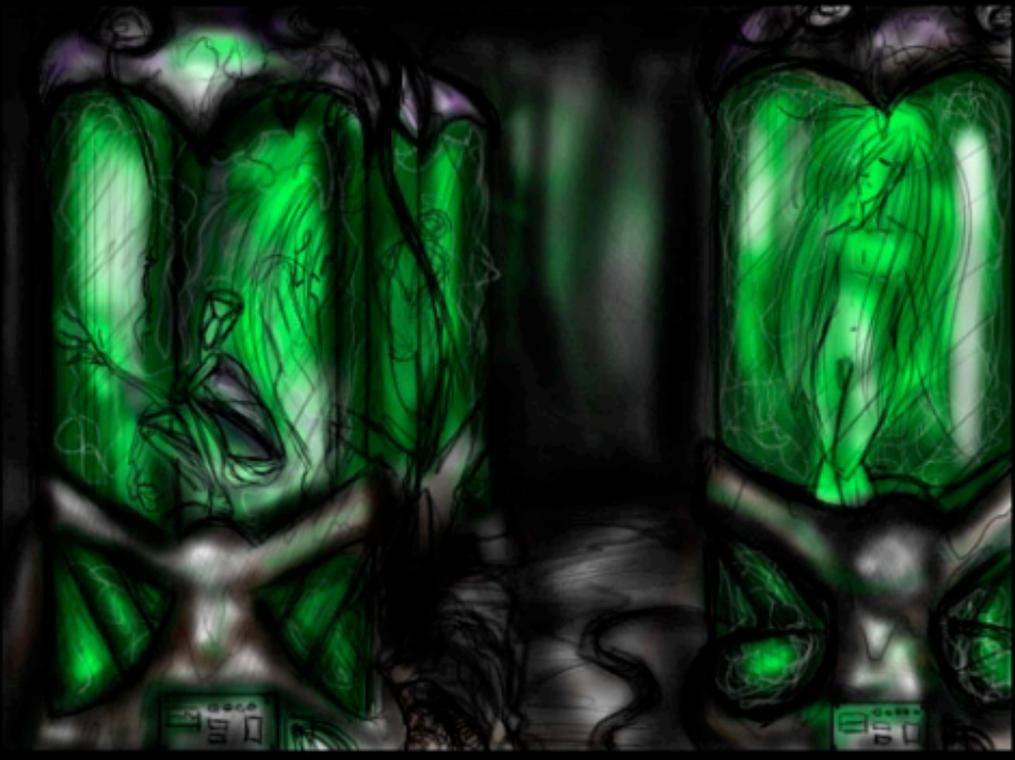
And these robots and I
are all your monsters.



If you wish to
perceive it that
way, it's your
choice.

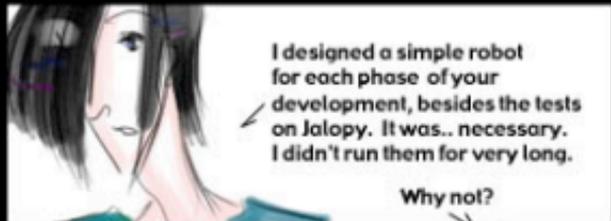
Come on. You
wanted to see
everything,
didn't you?

In here.



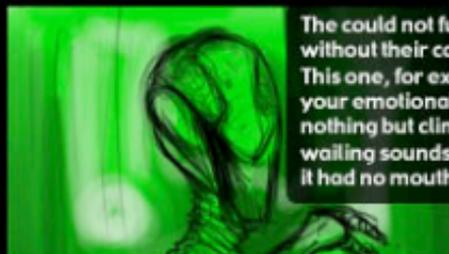


I can understand the one that looks exactly like me. A backup, right? But what about these metallic looking ones?



I designed a simple robot for each phase of your development, besides the tests on Jalopy. It was.. necessary. I didn't run them for very long.

Why not?



The could not function properly without their comrade systems. This one, for example, only ran your emotional system. It did nothing but cling and ..make wailing sounds, even though it had no mouth.



You can make ... copies of me?



No. No, I realized from the start that would be unacceptable. The software is designed to adjust itself, according of environmental factors and other moment-to-moment data.



I could create another clone of you, but it would not, **COULD** not be you. Your mind is simply too complicated, too conscious, to make a copy of for more than an infinitesimal amount of time.



What you're saying is you created a soul for me.

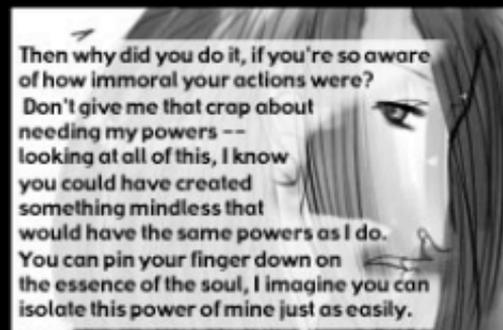


Yes. I suppose you could term it that way. But all I have created is a forced, artificial soul, Midnight. My brother, as you already have noted, creates fresh, new ones. I'm sorry I couldn't give to you what he gives to millions of others.



I had that once already.

Yes.. and it should have been left alone at that.



Then why did you do it, if you're so aware of how immoral your actions were? Don't give me that crap about needing my powers -- looking at all of this, I know you could have created something mindless that would have the same powers as I do. You can pin your finger down on the essence of the soul, I imagine you can isolate this power of mine just as easily.



Midnight, do you know what I am?

I could guess, but I shall be honest. No. Furthermore, you frighten me.

Yes... I understand that much. I'm rather afraid of myself. >

I have never been alive, Midnight. I was never born the way you were born. You don't remember being small, but it happened to you, things happened to you that I never had.

I'm not trying to make you feel.. guilty, I am merely trying to explain... what has made me the way I am.

But you're alive now. You walk around, talk, eat, sleep...

I am copying people like you. These behaviors are not natural to me. I'm a clone, perhaps not biologically, but emotionally.. The worst possible way.

Then why try, if you're so bad at it?

Because I want you.

You want to BE me.

...Not really, though sometimes I ... What I most want is to please you. To know how.

Because your brother abandoned you, right? And I'm here to make you feel better.

Listen, if you're so much different than living things, then stop trying to familiarize with them. Accept what you are and leave other people out of it. It's obviously impossible for you to connect with a mortal on any level, so you should give up before you hurt anymore people.

...Impossible?

Well, from what you've said, that's what I think! Anyway, you're making me forget what I wanted to ask you.

What are the lights in my back for?

Ah..Those are your vital signs. If you are uninjured, however, they display your emotions. Red for extreme anxiety, yellow for mild disquiet, green for content, blue for pleasure, and .. well, usually some mixture of those colors, such as purple, will indicate various other, more specific emotions.



You mean I'm some kind of overgrown moodring?! That's -- That's **RIDICULOUS!** **WHY** did you put that in?!



I'm not very adept at reading peoples' responses. I'd hoped that with those lights, we'd be able to.. get along better.



It's distracting, not to mention a violation of my privacy! I should able to express my emotions the way I please, not have it flashing no my back like a **BILLBOARD** for all to see!



I can make the glow more mild --



You can take the damn thing out!



Please.. Please don't be upset. I'm only trying to understand you. I'm ignorant, but I assure you, I'm by no means incapable of learning.



I want you to teach me -- but I need your patience. I know you have little left reserved for me but.. I beg of you, please be patient.

....Well. In the meantime, you can at least help me control this crazy hair of mine somehow.

I would be more than glad to.





Wake up,
Fern. You
need a
bath.

Gzzbt.



Did I do
anything..
stupid? >
Pretty sure I
did ... dunno
what... errr..
too hard to
think..



M'tired, Smoke.
Couldn't this
wait ...

It's eleven in the
morning. You got
enough sleep.



Mmm...
I smell coffee..
you made coffee?

Mm hm.



Oh. It's daytime.

Very observant.

Well well. Um.
Where are we
going, now that
I'm all dressed?



I somehow don't find
that as disturbing
as the fact you
used the
word "fuschia."

Come on,
princess.



Clothes shopping.
Yours are ragged,
and Mid has been
wearing the same
fuschia t shirt for
god knows how long.

Good morning,
Mid.

Morning,
Smoke..



How did it go last night?

Passably. I still have a lot to
read, but Cal and I got along..
fine.

I see.

^

He braided your hair?

He thought it would help.



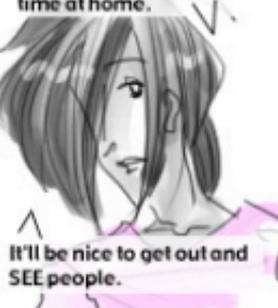
(little green goblin)



grumble
Cal never
braided MY
hair...



Wow, so we're actually
going out for once? I
was beginning to think
you guys spent ALL your
time at home.



It'll be nice to get out and
SEE people.

You seem awfully
confident that
they will be glad
to see you.

Pardon me,
Fern, but if I
shared your
cynicism, I'd
be signing myself
up for failure
to thrive.



I don't see how you
give people much
of a chance, anyway.
Maybe one day you
and Cal will wake up
and realize the world
isn't about to offer
anything to people
who just lie around
pitying themselves.
You have to give a
little to get a little.



As much as I am
put to shame by
your cliché remarks,
I find it necessary to
inform you that
such advice is utterly
useless in our
particular situation.
We have only
so many cheeks
to turn before
we run out. I speak
from experience.



Fine, then you
can sit here
and ROT if
you like --

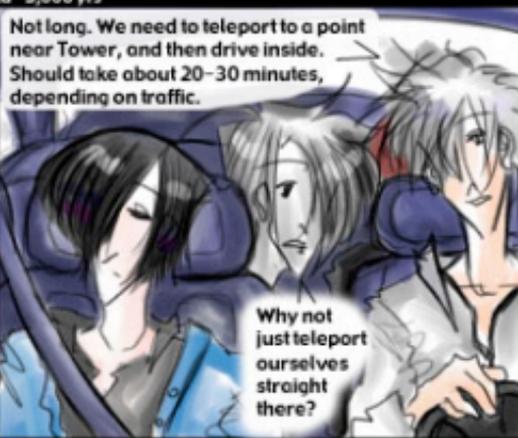
What do YOU
know of anything,
you little --



Whether you like
going out or not,
you both need
clothes.
Get in the car.



How long is this drive gonna take?



Not long. We need to teleport to a point near Tower, and then drive inside. Should take about 20-30 minutes, depending on traffic.

Why not just teleport ourselves straight there?



Because, my mortal-brained friend, there are RULES pertaining to teleportation. We don't use it unless it is desperately needed.



Please, don't work yourself too hard explaining anything. I'm just asking because Cal settled down for a nap right away.



Cal? He'd fall asleep on a drive around the BLOCK.

The movement of the car zonks him right out.



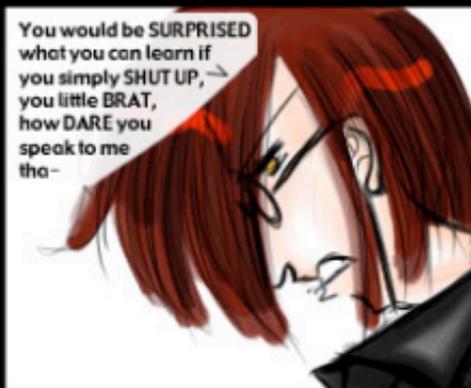
At any rate, you'd best stop flaunting your ignorance, especially when we arrive at Tower. People will notice.

WHAT is your problem?? Did a bug jump up your bum this morning or what?!

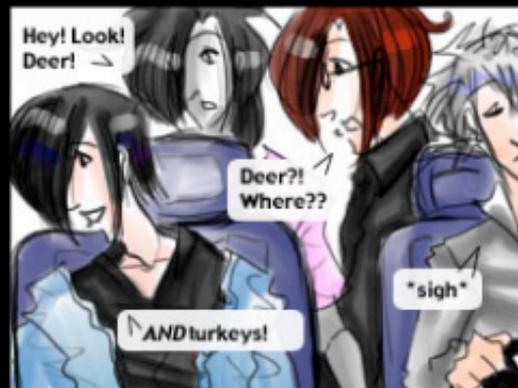


T--You-- Your constant PRATTling irritates me, all right?

I wouldn't BE prattling if SOMEBODY TAUGHT me like they were SUPPOSED to instead of acting like a rude GIT.



You would be SURPRISED what you can learn if you simply SHUT UP, you little BRAT, how DARE you speak to me tha-

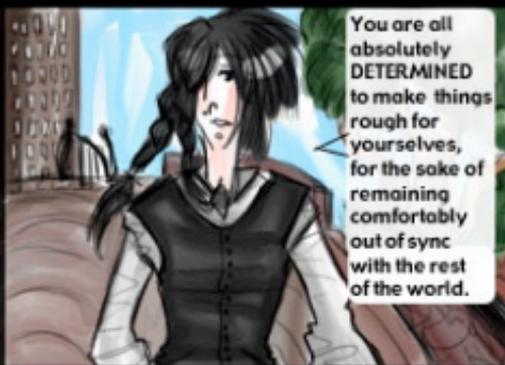


Hey! Look! Deer! →

Deer?! Where??

AND turkeys!

sigh



Oh, Sterling. Now I remember what I wanted to do. If you don't mind terribly, I would like you to spend some time with Mid alone.



I expect you'll have plenty of topics to discuss.



Aye aye, sir.

There will plenty of time for you to shop later, Mid. You know where to meet us, Sterling.



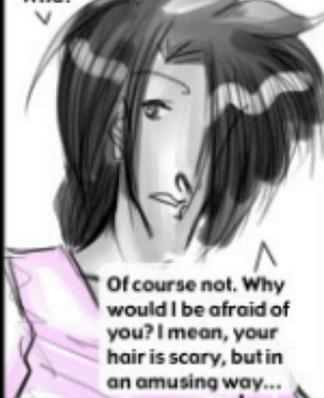
Right!

Well, here we are!



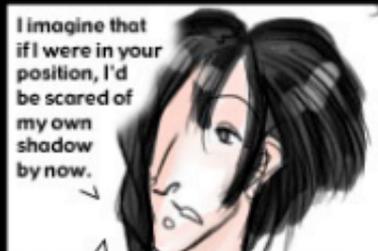
...Are you scared of me?

Who?



Of course not. Why would I be afraid of you? I mean, your hair is scary, but in an amusing way...

I imagine that if I were in your position, I'd be scared of my own shadow by now.



It's not exactly an easy experience, what you've gone through. Having to be comrades with your murderer..

Fern? He isn't scary. He's just an old, cranky drunk. Cal is the one who makes my skin crawl.



It's something about the way he moves -- But I guess I shouldn't be telling you this, huh.



Actually, I think opening up's exactly what Cal hoped you'd do.

I guess.. It's been pretty frustrating, with only a crumudgeon, a cripplingly shy eccentric, and a nearly-mute stoic to talk to.

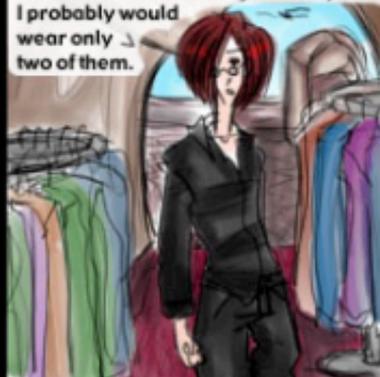
You need to know a few things.. especially pertaining to the public view of the Callanerialians. Y'see.. in Faidia, the Callanerialians are the **bad guys**.

The bad guys?

Come on, let's go in this café.



I frikkin' hate shopping. There must be a BILLION different things in here, and I probably would wear only two of them.



I'll find them for you. Go in the changing room. Try this on.



I hate taking my clothes off in a strange place...



Hey!!! What the hell? These aren't my size, Smoke, they're too fucking small!!

They're your size.

Damnit, no they're not!



Just try them on.

Yeah yeah.. easy for you to say... Ugh, I'll suffocate in these...

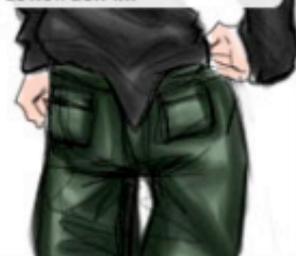


Hmm.

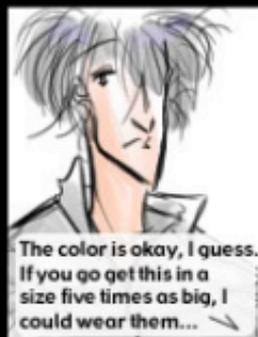
AGH! Who said you could come in?!!



See? They're too small. You might like having yours all tight but I sure as hell don't...



The color is okay, I guess. If you go get this in a size five times as big, I could wear them...



W... WHAT'S THAT LOOK?!

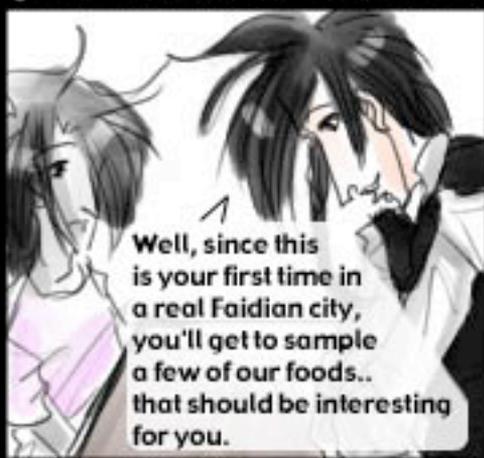
YOU WERE LOOKING AT MY BUM, WEREN'T YOU!



Someday, by god, I'll make a friend who isn't a dick with ears.

We're buying those. I'll go find some more.



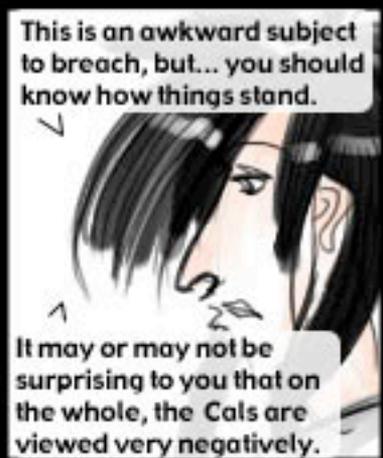


Well, since this is your first time in a real Faidian city, you'll get to sample a few of our foods.. that should be interesting for you.



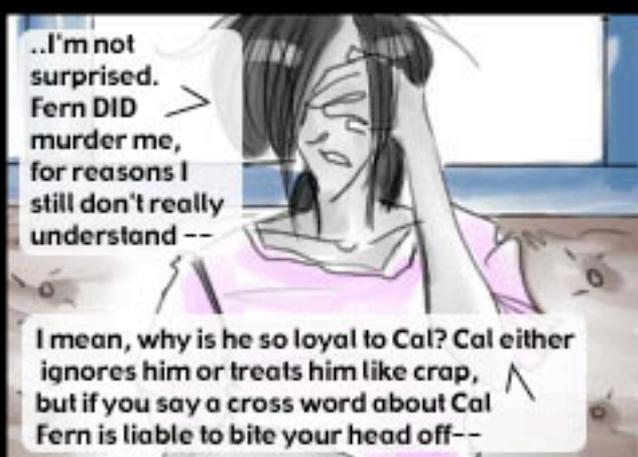
Yeah.. This does seem like an amazing city. ✓

But what were you saying before?



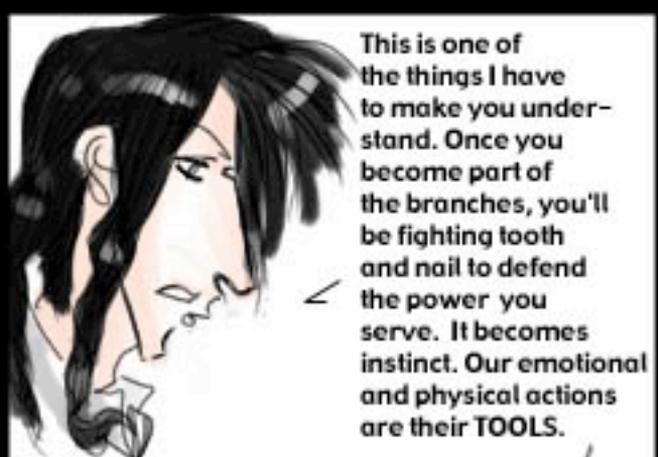
This is an awkward subject to breach, but... you should know how things stand.

It may or may not be surprising to you that on the whole, the Cals are viewed very negatively.



..I'm not surprised. Fern DID murder me, for reasons I still don't really understand --

I mean, why is he so loyal to Cal? Cal either ignores him or treats him like crap, but if you say a cross word about Cal Fern is liable to bite your head off--

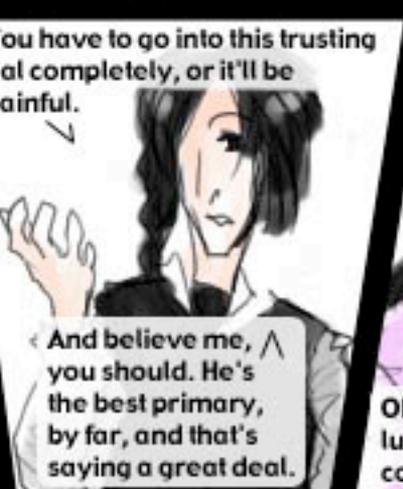


This is one of the things I have to make you understand. Once you become part of the branches, you'll be fighting tooth and nail to defend the power you serve. It becomes instinct. Our emotional and physical actions are their TOOLS.



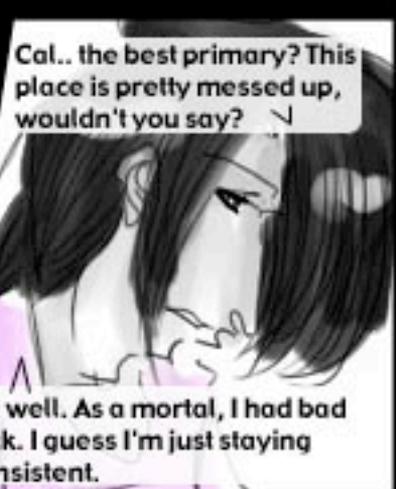
So you're saying I pretty much have to give up being an individual? ✓

To start. I can assure you that it may not be as bad as you imagine, but I cannot honestly guarantee anything.



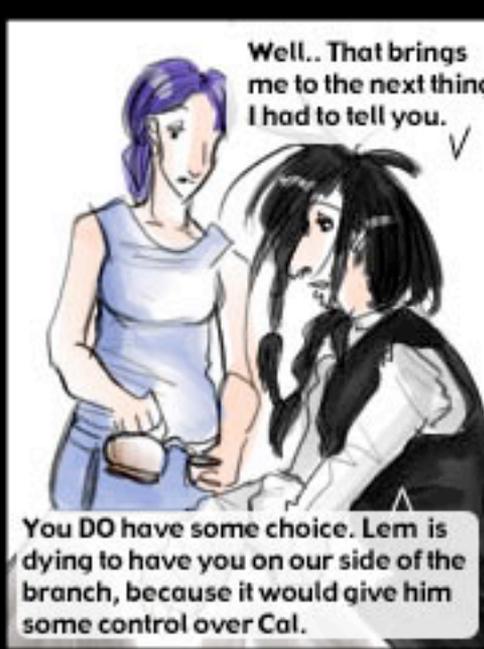
You have to go into this trusting Cal completely, or it'll be painful. ✓

And believe me, you should. He's the best primary, by far, and that's saying a great deal.



Cal.. the best primary? This place is pretty messed up, wouldn't you say? ✓

Oh well. As a mortal, I had bad luck. I guess I'm just staying consistent.



Well.. That brings me to the next thing I had to tell you. ✓

You DO have some choice. Lem is dying to have you on our side of the branch, because it would give him some control over Cal.



Terrific. So it's either go with Cal, or come here? ✓



It's your choice. ✓

Whatever you choose, I'll help you.



What's the catch? ✓

They're both bloody hard to cope with. You have your Scylla, and you have your Charybdis.

Whippee. ✓



That was a very long day.. I thought about what Sterling and I talked about all the way ...

All the way ... home. Heh. "Home," is it, now?



I got new clothes... It's odd, people complain about materialism ... But there is so much comfort in objects sometimes.. the sensation of possessing something. Your own.



After all, one of the first things you do to people to dehumanize them is take away what belongs to them..

If I'm going to lose so many other things... at least I have these stupid clothes. Big fat comfort that is.



Mid. What did you tell Sterling? ✓



I....he told me I had a choice.. I said.. I would wait. See how things turn out..here.

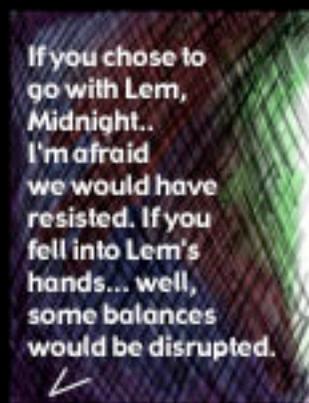


Lem won't be happy to hear that.



Hm. Well, there's no worry of a war then.

A war?! What about a war?! >



If you chose to go with Lem, Midnight.. I'm afraid we would have resisted. If you fell into Lem's hands... well, some balances would be disrupted.

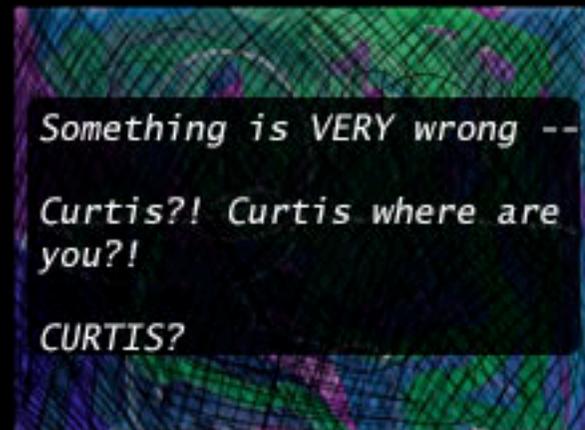


Balances? ✓



Something is wrong...

Yes, Midnight. B... We make sure everything remains even, while mortals enjoy it



Something is VERY wrong --
Curtis?! Curtis where are you?!
CURTIS?



CURTIS!!



.....I'm getting pretty sick of this. ✓

I guess something must have gone wrong..

The thing is, where am I now? Am I still in heaven.. or whatever that was?

This seems pretty real to me...



rumble

Och, I'm starving. DEFINITELY real.

...Huh?



Hey! Wait! I won't hurt you, come back!



Oh.. What a cute little creature you are. Do you talk? Can you help me?



.....



Ah... hah... ha.haha! H-hello! Mr. Dragon! Sir! Um! Sorry?

Oh my god. I am so dead.



.....





Hey! Wait!
You can't just
walk away
from me!

I KNOW you
can talk at
least, I think you
probably can.

If you can't speak English, at least SAY
something to me in your own language...
I need help, here!



This is still Faidia, isn't it? ... Listen, you're the
only person I've seen since I got here. I need --
I need to know what's going on! Where am I,
HOW did I get here, WHEN am I --



Oh. Fine then. I see how it
is. I'm sorry, but I'm going
to have to follow you.
Believe me, if I had a choice
about this, I wouldn't be out
in the middle of nowhere
starving to death with no one but
a wingless dragon to keep me
company. What kind of
dragon doesn't have wings,
anyway?



A two hour walk later...

Water..
what I
would do
for some
water...

And some
food. But
water first.



Are we stopping? Thank god.
Oh.. that's your house, I'm
guessing.

Well.. I won't come in uninvited. I haven't stooped
that low yet. And who knows, maybe you're
planning on eating me.



But I'm not going anywhere. Not until you talk
to me.





It's so cold... at least the moon is nice...



snifffff

snifsnif

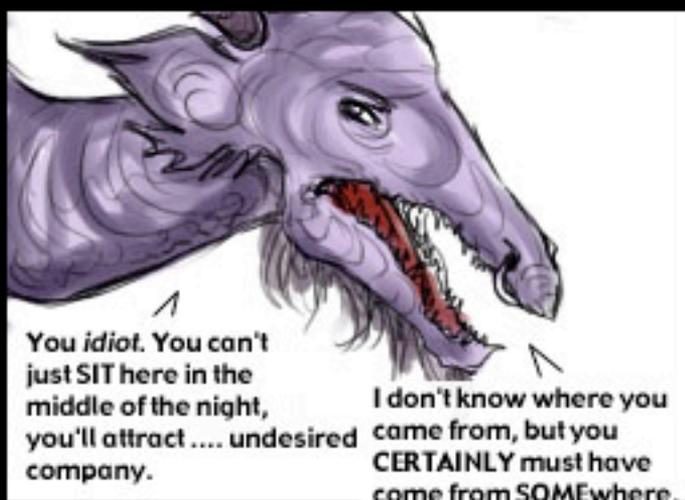


WHAT, may I ask, do you think you're doing still here? Go away! Go home! Your kind are not wanted here!

Oh, so you've decided to talk at last, eh?

Go away!

I haven't got anywhere **TO** go. If you gave me some information, maybe I **COULD** leave, but until then, you're stuck with me.



You *idiot*. You can't just **SIT** here in the middle of the night, you'll attract undesired company.

I don't know where you came from, but you **CERTAINLY** must have come from **SOMEwhere**.



Undesired company? What, like you?

Listen, if I could go home, do you **REALLY** think I'd be out here, freezing, starving, and forced to keep company with a stinky, old dragon?



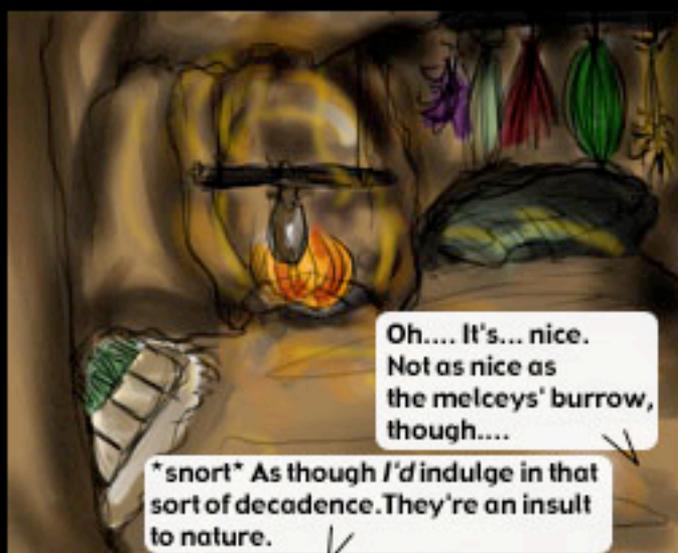
Bite your tongue, you disgusting whelp.

I am **NOT** disgusting.

Just Just be **QUIET** and get **DOWN** there, all right? You're going to attract predators from **MILES** around shouting like that.



This has got to be the lamest reception I've received in days. ... and that's saying a lot.



Oh.... It's... nice. Not as nice as the melceys' burrow, though....

snort As though I'd indulge in that sort of decadence. They're an insult to nature.



He knows what melceys are...that means I'm still in Faidia, at least.

Oh... I... food...smells good..

grumble

I don't know.. They seemed fairly in tune with nature..

Sit down before you collapse, human. **mutter** Must be out of my mind...

Excuse me for what may be an unfair assumption, but is there anything questionable in this that I should know about before eating it? Like.. um. Strange animal parts and the like.

I see no purpose in excusing you, since you seem to thrive on making what you call unfair assumptions, but to answer your question, I am omnivorous but I subsist mostly on plantlife. There isn't very much meat to be had out here, and I doubt I would eat more than was needed even if there was. That you are holding is simple porridge. Unless pulverized grain is offensive to you...



No no, this is fine. Thank you. I mean it.

I need to find... I need to find an elemental, as quickly as possible. Any elemental, really... I just.. I have to get back in contact with them.

...What, pray tell, do you know of elementals?



But what about it? Can you tell me anything?



Can you help?



Too much and not enough! Do..Do you know where they are? Can you at least show me how to get to Tower?

I'm.... afraid there isn't much to say on this matter.

From what you have said, I believe you have been.. mislead. The "tower" you refer to must be Gorrheim, the fallen city. It that has long since fallen to ruin, and no one enters it for fear of the ghosts living there.



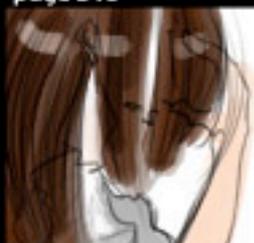
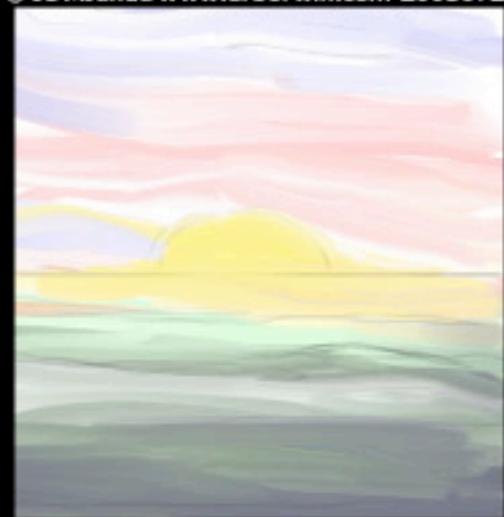
A.... century ago...?
A hundred YEARS..?

The elementals disappeared a century ago, with barely a trace. The world has continued on, of course, but they have apparently gone into a state of inactivity. Many have concluded that it is all for the best.

That is, indeed, what I said. Now if you don't mind, I have had a tedious day. Good night.



...thank god I'm so tired... otherwise I'd have to think...



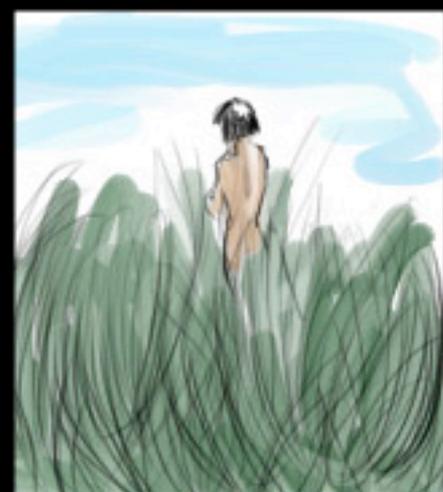
ochh....
must be morning..



Hrm.. Wonder where my
new "friend" went... →



He has some weird stuff, for a wild
dragon... ↘



Y..you have
a human
form!



And you
haven't got
ANY CLOTHES
ON.



If it's any of your business,
yes, I am a coagiate.
But believe me, it is
not by choice. ↗

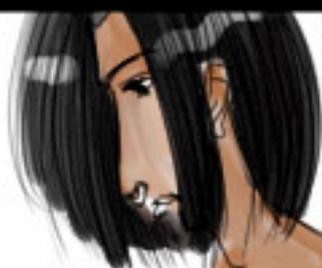


Manipulating some instruments
without opposable thumbs is
decidedly difficult. But aside
from that, this form is worthless. →

Um... right.. Listen.. My name
is Morse. Would you mind
telling me yours? <

Suddenly so polite, now that
you've seen my human
form. Heh.

My name is
Abelarde Kemfdal. >



So um. What is that purply thing you were using for?

It's a crestis. I was gauging time.

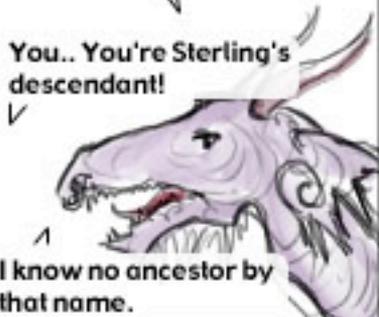
One of those magical elemental rocks?



Erm, yes. One of the last of its kind, actually. This has been in my family for as long as I can remember--

You.. You're Sterling's descendant!

I know no ancestor by that name.



Well... of course not, it's too long ago...



But your... your ancestor, I saw him. He.. helped the Callanerialians. He was commander of the Guard at To-- Gorrheim.

You have some very unusual things to say, don't you.

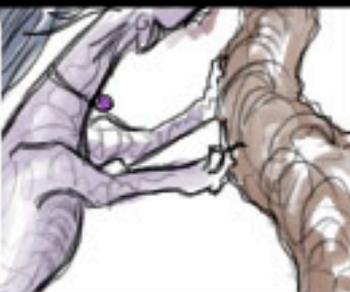
I'm just trying to make sense of all this. Why were you gauging time?

It is slowing down.

Slowing down...?



My great grandmother was the first to notice. She passed on her research. Ever since the elementals disappeared, time has flowed more and more slowly...



But.. how do you notice such a thing?

Part of your mind recognizes it, but it takes actual time magic, like this crestis, to measure it.



What it has to tell me isn't pretty.

We are losing as much as a second each year. The effect is increasing exponentially. Eventually, time will stop altogether.

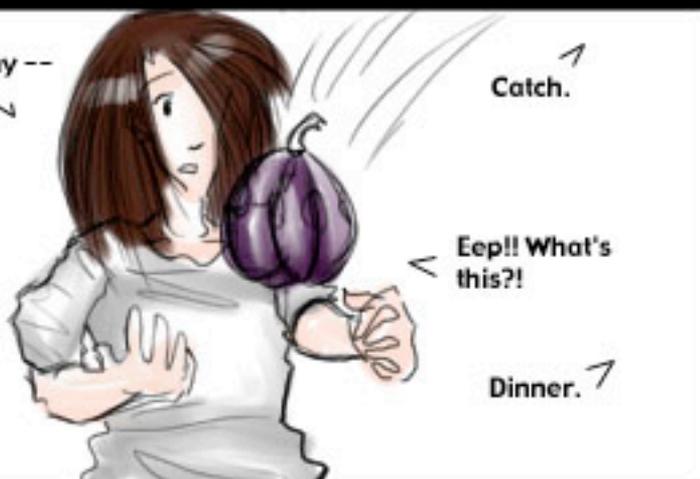


But why --

Catch.

Eep!! What's this?!

Dinner.



I know only this -- the planet is angry. Otherwise, the elementals would not be imprisoned.

But... But how do we prevent time from stopping?!

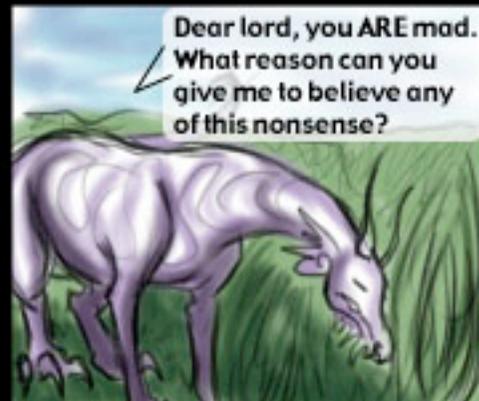
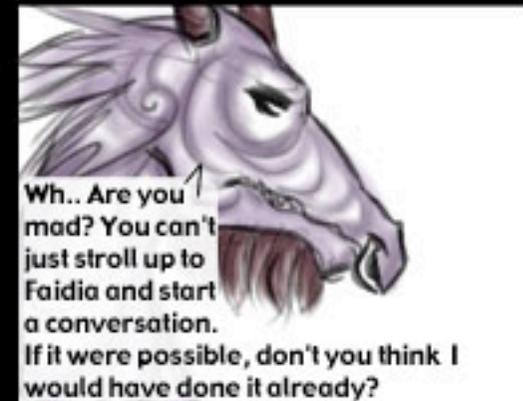
We don't. The planet has chosen.



Well, I've made a choice, too, and I plan to live it out.

Where can I talk to the planet?



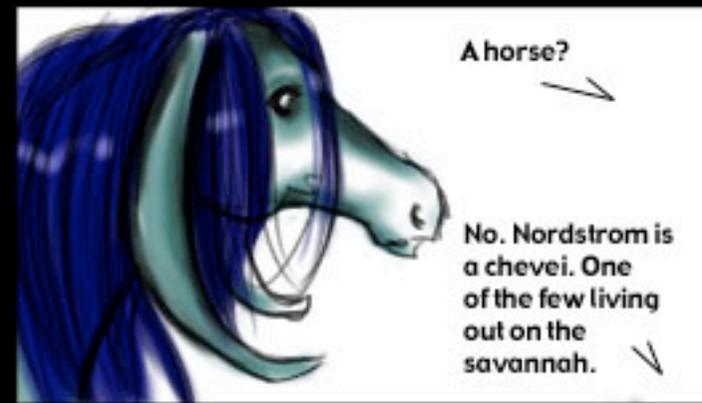
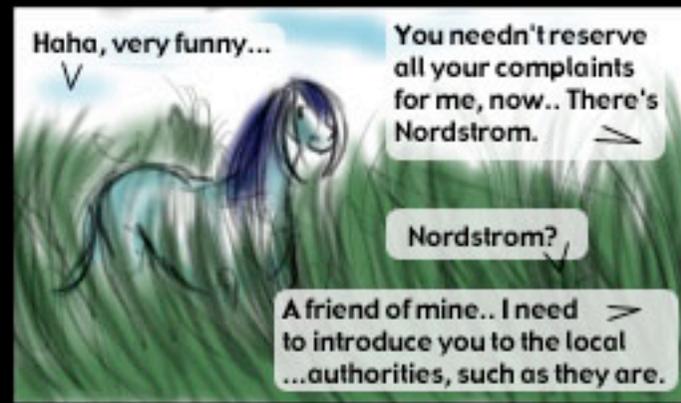
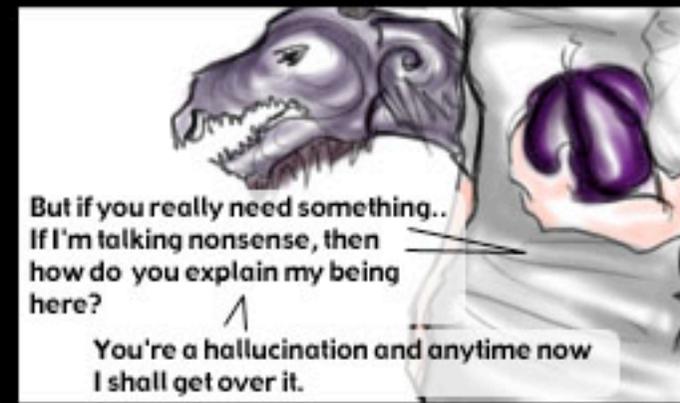


Wh.. Are you mad? You can't just stroll up to Faidia and start a conversation. If it were possible, don't you think I would have done it already?

Impossible for you, maybe. I think the individual we're talking about is... my cousin. And if he doesn't speak to ME after all that's happened... Then there really is nothing we can do.

Dear lord, you ARE mad. What reason can you give me to believe any of this nonsense?

Nobody's given me reasons, I don't see why I should oblige you.



But if you really need something.. If I'm talking nonsense, then how do you explain my being here?
You're a hallucination and anytime now I shall get over it.

Haha, very funny...

You needn't reserve all your complaints for me, now.. There's Nordstrom.

Nordstrom?

A friend of mine.. I need to introduce you to the local...authorities, such as they are.

A horse?

No. Nordstrom is a chevei. One of the few living out on the savannah.



Oh. Well, this is more my speed.

She's very pretty...

Mmm, yes.. Chevei think quite highly of themselves in that regard.

But if you so much as look askance at her foal, I'm afraid she'll become quite ill-tempered out of instinct. I have the dent in my head to prove it.

Ummm.. Duly noted..



So this is the human you found?

Do you see any other humans around here, Nordstrom?

Don't get smart-alecky with me, Abelarde... So, where did she come from?



No idea. She has a wild story having to do with elementals.



Oh, wonderful. I'd hoped we'd been spared involvement of any kind with them forever. She's just a little girl, how could she know about such things?

I don't abide well by elemental people..they made a mess of this world, best not let them stick around here.

Duh. We all feel that way, Seth.

But what do we do with her? The melceys could take her, perhaps, in their burrow--

Someone could take her to Asize. There may be straglers there.

NO way, I am not having that thing live with us --

Then WHAT?

Perhaps a cooperative carmor would take her...



How about this -- human, what do YOU want?



What.. what do I want?



I want -- I want one of you to BELIEVE me, I want a SHOWER, I want a pair of SHOES --

I want .. I want to go HOME! I didn't ASK for ANY of this!

I want -- I want my mom -- oh god.. Oh god... I'm never going home. I'll never see -- my mom --

Never, never, I'll... never see anything of mine ever again --

Mom.. I need my mom..

plop



I gave her something to calm her. She's asleep now.



Why weren't we more kind to her? We saw that she was a child.. ✓



It's not our job to comfort humans. ✓

What kind of monsters are we if we don't even assist a fellow living creature? ✓

...well...



This much is obvious -- she has been through a great deal.



A hundred years have passed. Remember the legends. Could she.. might she be the one?

I don't know, and I honestly don't care. Even if the legends aren't nonsense, I see no reason why we should do anything to help the elementals.



Abe... Time is slowing. Like it or not, if there is a way to free the elementals, we --



Nordstrom. If this girl is who Seth thinks she is, fine, wonderful. But how in HELL are we going to even FIND elementals?

We will LOOK for them, Abe.

They could be ANYWHERE. Where do we even start? How?

There are ways. Your crestis?



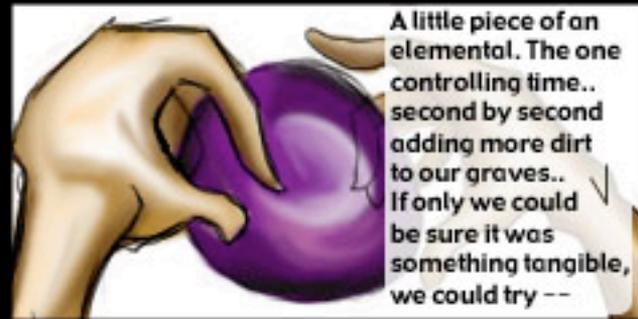
This damn thing has never been of any use. I try to follow its leads.. but they go nowhere.



And lately it's been dead as a doornail.

The power may be running out. What's in it is what I put into it, and that isn't much.

A little piece of an elemental. The one controlling time.. second by second adding more dirt to our graves.. If only we could be sure it was something tangible, we could try --



W..Wha?

It's... it's reacting to something!



next morning

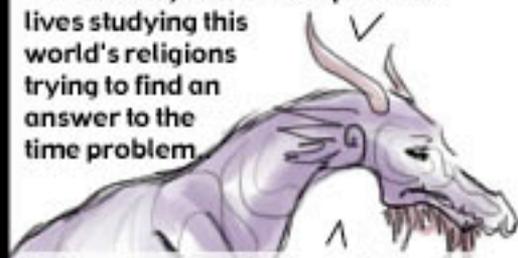


Ah... you're awake.
Ahem. Well... To start.. It is necessary for you to understand how many Faidians feel about the elementals .. Please note that this is to explain, not excuse, our behavior.

They abandoned us, just, as it seems, they abandoned you. On that account, we have something in common.. And.. It is regretful that we caused you undue.. anxiety.



We have talked all night about what your presence might mean. We're all scholars, and we've spent our lives studying this world's religions trying to find an answer to the time problem.



Nothing has been forthcoming. Religions are only an interpretation of elemental science. It is as though all REAL knowledge has been stripped away from us deliberately



So...If you are willing.. I would like to hear your story in its entirety.

All right. I don't suppose you'll be able to resist interrupting me.



.... I will make my best effort.



Okay. Though I won't blame you.. This sort of story begs for interruptions.

So.. I told him. In a way, it made me feel a little better.. Speaking of the things I actually DID know instead of lingering on everything I didn't...

But I had absorbed information that stretched over centuries, millennia, thrown backwards and forwards again... Perhaps it wasn't so funny how tired I was, after all.



Abelarde, at least, kept quiet while I was talking.. that made it easier.

But I realized as I spoke, that though I felt exhausted in mind and body, only a few days had actually passed for me since I ran into Cal in the bookstore... And the only time I had actually skipped was 100 years.

And then.. it was like a tv fizzling out. Everything.. evaporated, and I woke up here.



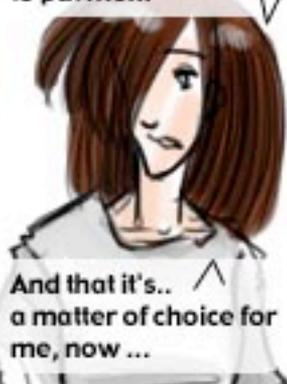
I'm not even sure why.. I want to help them so badly.. They destroyed my world.. But they suffered so horribly. I just.. I just need something to RESOLVE... or I'll never.. I'll never get rid of this awful feeling.





Let's.. review what Curtis told you. Right now that seems the most important, because he's.. or was, in the present.

Yes.. He told me they knew where and.. WHEN to put me...



And that it's.. a matter of choice for me, now ...

But I don't really feel like I have a choice at all..

You don't? ↙ ↘

No! Like I told you, I feel like if I don't do something, I'll -- I'll go crazy! Anyway, it's like.. my job now or something. I HAVE to. ↘



But he made it quite clear to you that it WASN'T your job .

A few days ago, you had a life that had nothing to do with this world.

Yeah. But that's all gone now. ↘

You're still in existence, aren't you? I doubt the elementals want just one more tool to get them out of this scrape, and that certainly isn't what they need or deserve.

What exactly are you saying? ↙ ↘



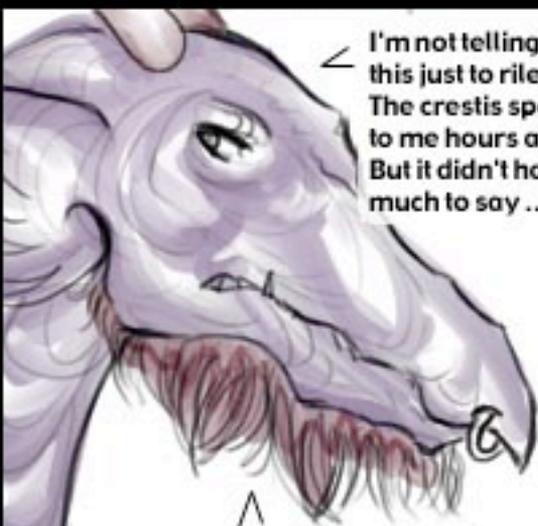
I'm saying that you should just forget about it... for now.

It's all a matter of time, isn't it? Elementals are immortal, but even they require time to heal up the deepest wounds.



But Rhodes is slowing time down, he hates Faidia, he wants --

What Rhodes wants right now is of no consequence until you know what you want. ↙



I'm not telling you this just to rile you up.. The crestis spoke to me hours ago. But it didn't have much to say ...

Just that.. it's too soon. Far too soon. Then it went dead again. Someone wants us to wait.. but for what, I don't know.

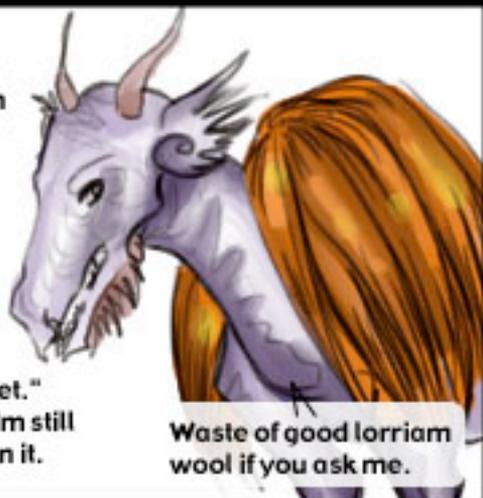


We're not meant to delve deeply into these matters, Morse. They've entangled you too far, and now it seems they want to remind you that you're still alive... That you're still your own person. That's your real power, and if you lose it, the cycle begins again.

six weeks later.



You're still working on that crow-shay? ↘



It's "crochet."
And yes, I'm still working on it.

Waste of good lorriam wool if you ask me.

Nobody DID ask you. And wasn't it you who said I needed clothes for when it gets cold? I'm sick of wearing this same thing day after day... ↘



What is that stuff? I haven't seen it before. ↘



Shallots, good for various cooking purposes. ✓



And don't be surprised that you don't recognize it. Six weeks is not nearly enough time for you to have learned the wide range of substances I use.

Oh, spare me the lecture, Abelarde. You told me yourself you're not much older than I am, stop acting like you are.



We may be relatively the same age, but it is not a matter of argument who the mature individual is here. ↘



At least my species teaches its young to CLOTHE itself at an early age.

Abe, you don't WEAR clothes. ✓



...Yes. Precisely what I'm saying. ✓

I stayed as long as I thought I needed to ... learning as much as I could without tipping him off...

Six months.. it was hard to believe I'd been here that long.

I had to go...

I knew he wouldn't let me, so I planned to leave at night.. I couldn't ... wait for whatever it was to happen. I was going crazy.

Asleep....perfect.

Quietly... quietly...

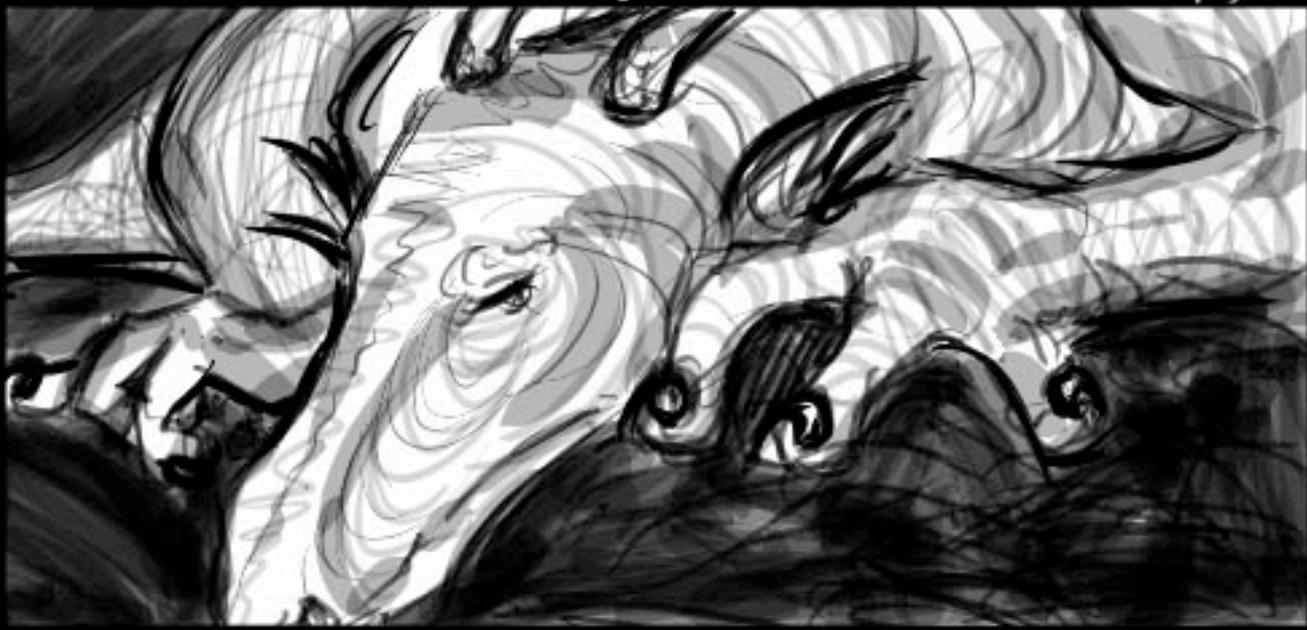
But I couldn't just leave..

...Thank you for everything, Abelarde.

....Shit, it's dark out here.

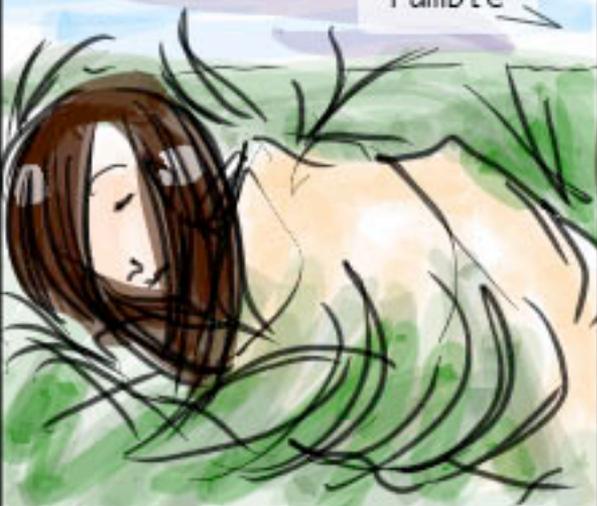
If you grow up in a city you have no idea how DARK nature can be...

C'mon, Morse. You've seen a lot worse. Remember what happened. Remember WHY you're here in the first place. A little dark isn't enough to scare me.



Two days later

rumble

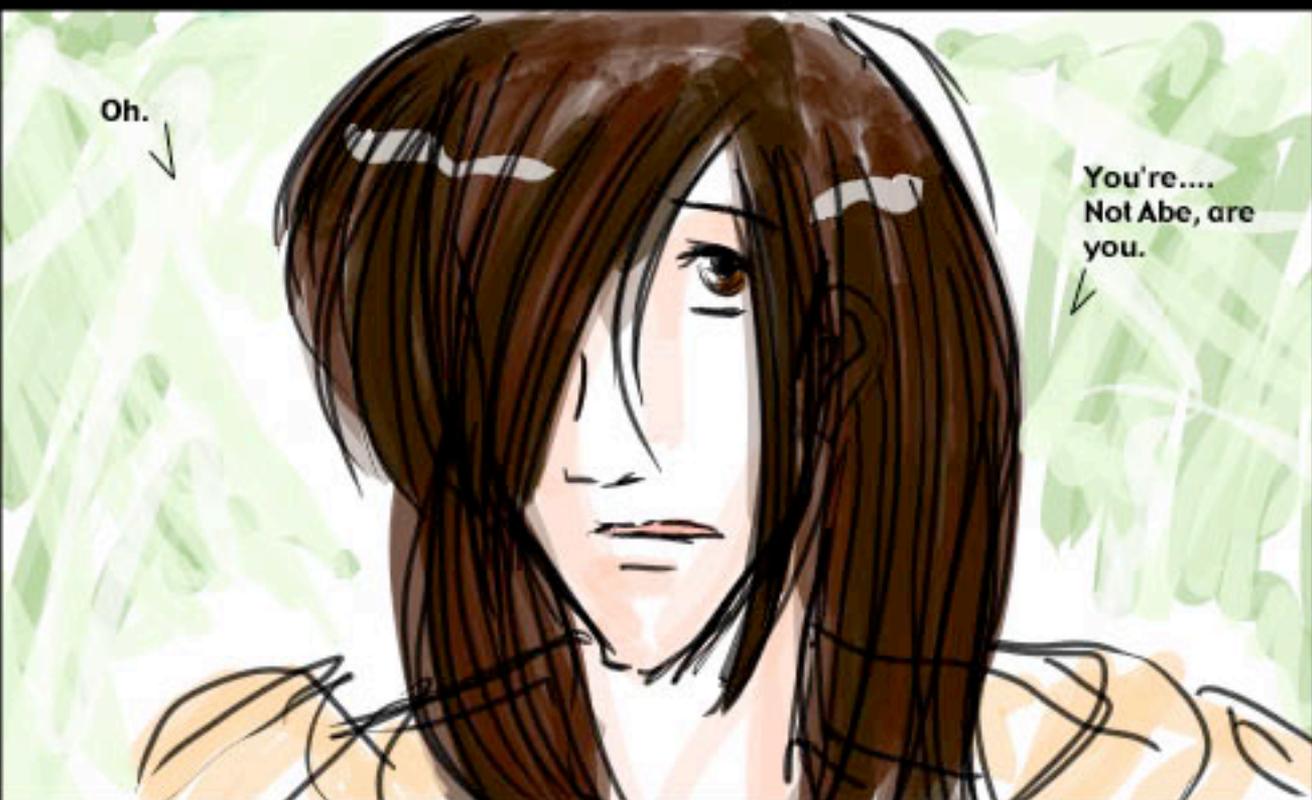


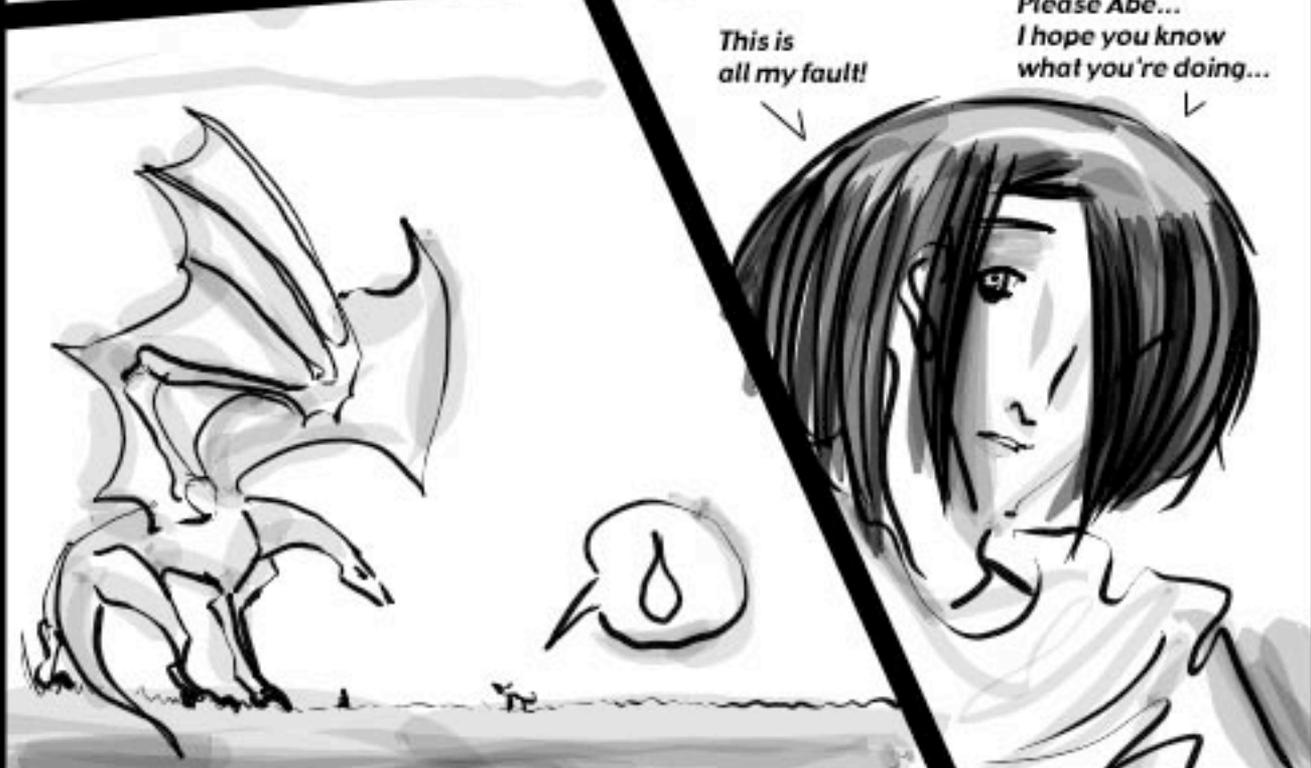
Mrf...
G'way,
Abe, I'm
sleeping..
your breath
stinks..



Oh.

You're....
Not Abe, are
you.





Wait--what just happened? He's not going to eat us? Did you two talk or something? Where are we going?



And stop holding onto my hand that way, I don't have to be lead like a child --!



SHUT up.

Haven't you done enough damage with your searing ignorance ALREADY?



You have NO idea what you've done. Being EATEN is the LEAST of our troubles. These are intelligent creatures. We have violated one of the planet's most ancient and VITAL laws by trespassing on their sacred land. Now we must face trial for our lives and the lives of EVERYONE WHO LIVES on MY land. THOUSANDS could die because of you.

I.. I'm sorry.. I didn't know.. How can they --



You think IGNORANCE is an excuse? I'm responsible for you.



"Sorry" fixes NOTHING.

...I....



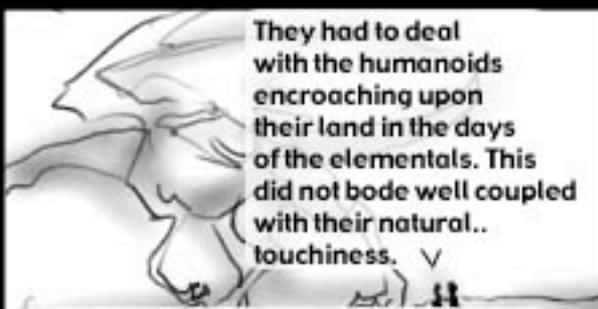
..All we can do is make the best of it, right..?

The best of it will be two heads on pikes -- yours and mine. But yes, we will try for it. You can do your best by KEEPING YOUR MOUTH SHUT.



All right.. all right.. I'm sorry. Why are they so strict?

They had to deal with the humanoids encroaching upon their land in the days of the elementals. This did not bode well coupled with their natural.. touchiness.



Not everyone loves your elementals as much as you do, Morse. Privy yourself to the fact.



Um.. What are these big mounds?

Nests. These are the clay fields where the cormors brood.

We're staying the night here. The full assembly won't be here until tomorrow.



I wasn't anywhere near these..why are they so mad?

You trespassed on their hunting territory, not nesting. Though it doesn't make much difference..either one is major trouble.



This is our host's nest. Be careful and don't fall in at the top. It's quite a distance to the bottom.



Here we are.

Ohhh.. Eggs! They're so pretty!

Don't be foolish. This is the best place for them to keep an eye on us.

They must trust us if they're letting us stay with the eggs, right?



Anyway, you couldn't make a dent in one of these eggs with a sledge hammer..

I don't care what you say, Abe.. I can't help but think these must be reasonable creatures, looking at how well they care for their babies...



Yes. Well, you would be surprised what reasonable creatures can be driven to do when they are abused.

Go to sleep. I imagine we're going to have a day of it tomorrow.

the next morning



All right. The trial is over.

That was pretty quick.



What's going to happen to us?

They won't kill us if we complete a task for them.

Complete a task ...? So this is like.. Hercules and cleaning stables or something? That makes sense.



What are you babbling about? You DO realize that this task is probably impossible to do, & therefore we're in as much trouble as before?.

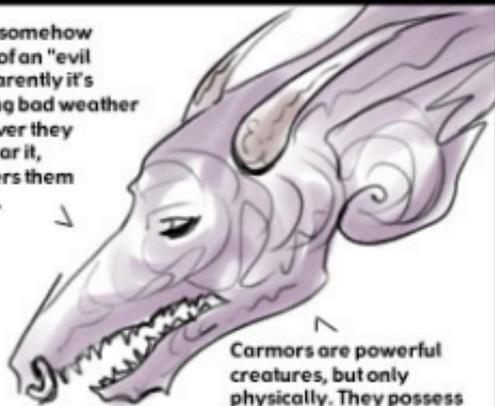


Please, your enthusiasm overwhelms me. You stay here and tell the carmors that while I give the task a spin, huh?

So what is the task?



We have to somehow rid an area of an "evil spirit." Apparently it's been causing bad weather and whenever they try to get near it, it overpowers them somehow...



Carmors are powerful creatures, but only physically. They possess no magic.

Wow.... But Abe, we don't have any magic either...



I know.

Shhh.
I think that is it.



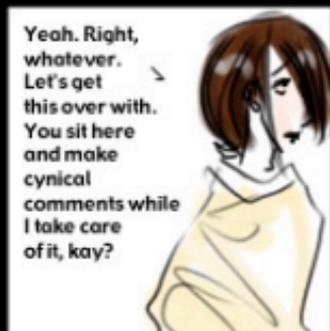
.....That's a SEAGULL. Don't tell me those huge dragons are scared of a BIRD.

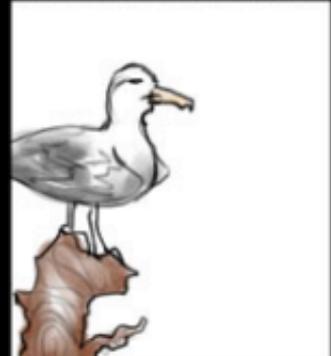


You of all people should understand that appearances are no indicator of power.

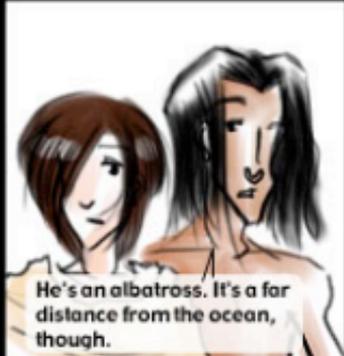


Yeah. Right, whatever. Let's get this over with. You sit here and make cynical comments while I take care of it, kay?

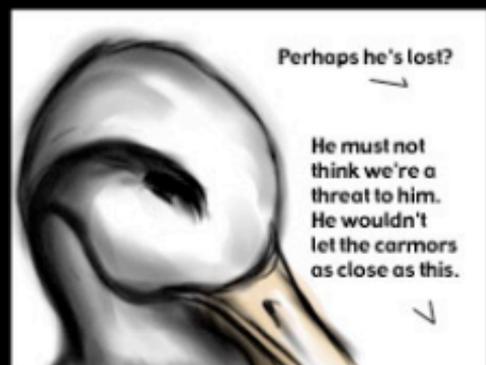




Hmm. Maybe not "seagull."
More like "wonking great
petrel."



He's an albatross. It's a far
distance from the ocean,
though.



Perhaps he's lost?

He must not
think we're a
threat to him.
He wouldn't
let the cormors
as close as this.



Wait... Smoke listed all of the elementals'
animal forms for me once!

One was an albatross!



You mean to tell me this could
be an elemental?

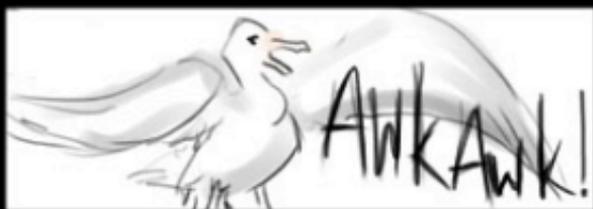
How many weather-controlling
albatrosses do YOU know?



If this is really him.. Maybe he can tell
us where the others are.



Hi there...
You're elemental
of air, aren't you?
Do you remember
me? We met only a
little while ago.
I'm Morse, I was
with Cal and Fern..?



Damn.
Abe, we have to get
him to REMEMBER,
but how?

Memories are not usually destroyable... They are therefore most often locked away rather than eradicated completely. If you find the key, in a sense, you'll unlock the memories.



It's kind of like when people die, they drink from the river of forgetfulness, Lethe. So then they don't remember their names, or their lives...



Names! The magic of names is fundamental, even superimposing that of the elementals themselves. You know his name, right? If he remembers his name, he may remember everything else as well.



That sounds too good to be true.



But I guess there's no harm in trying. Um. Fola?

No -- use his full name.

Er.. Okay... Um. They have absurdly convoluted names..

Folanerial. That's it. 7



plip

I guess it worked o_O

You guess --



EEP!



thud

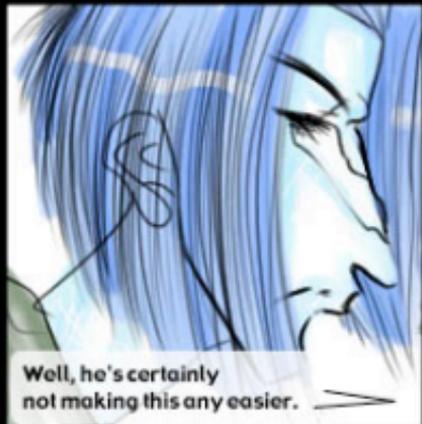
Sonnnnn of a bitch that hurt..



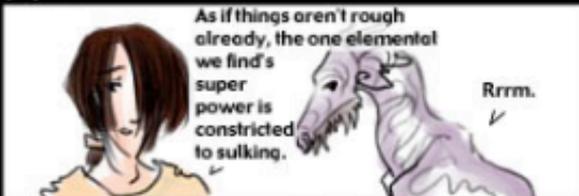
.... Why. Did. You. DO. That.

Eheheh! Sorry, sorry! Here, uh, here's my coat.





Well, he's certainly not making this any easier.



As if things aren't rough already, the one elemental we find's super power is constricted to sulking.

Rrrm.



We need to eat. I'll go hunting.

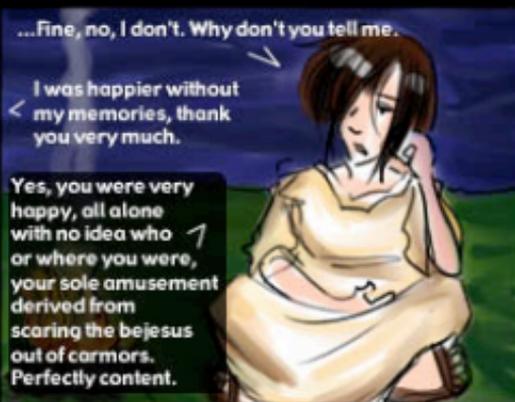
All right.. I'll stay here and make sure he doesn't fly off. Be careful.



Um. Mr Folanerial? Are you hungry? Abe's just gone off to find us something..



You have no idea what you've done, do you.



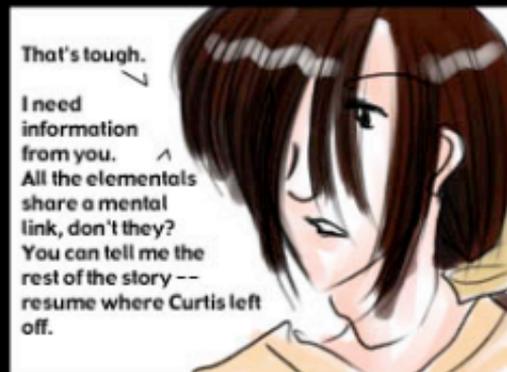
...Fine, no, I don't. Why don't you tell me.

I was happier without my memories, thank you very much.

Yes, you were very happy, all alone with no idea who or where you were, your sole amusement derived from scaring the bejesus out of carmors. Perfectly content.

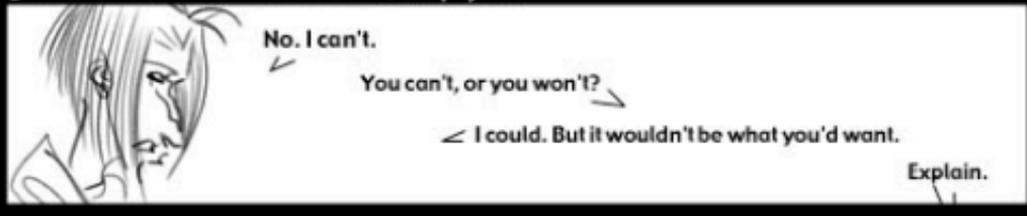


Listen, no offense, little girl, but I would rather not hear about it from you at the moment.



That's tough.

I need information from you. All the elementals share a mental link, don't they? You can tell me the rest of the story -- resume where Curtis left off.

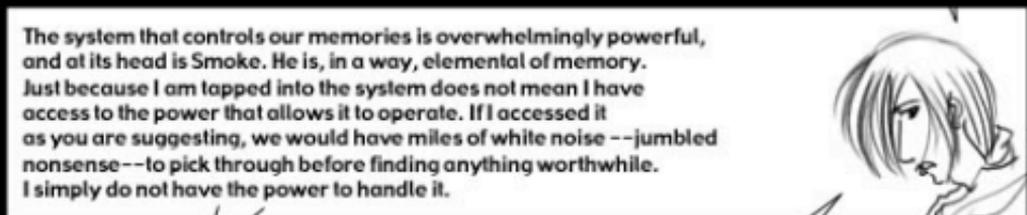


No. I can't.

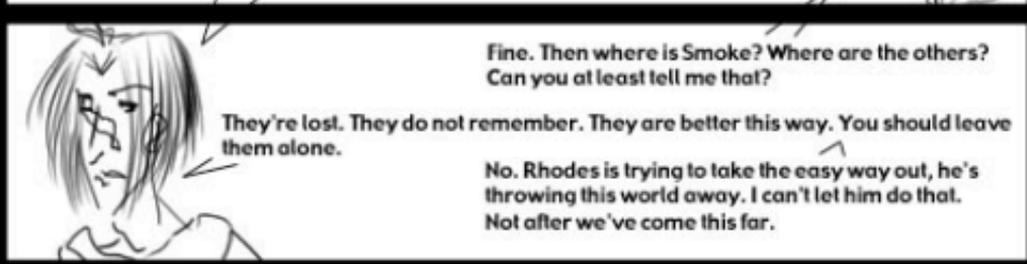
You can't, or you won't?

I could. But it wouldn't be what you'd want.

Explain.



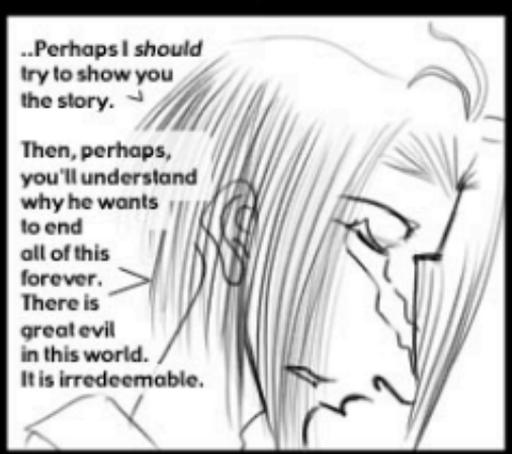
The system that controls our memories is overwhelmingly powerful, and at its head is Smoke. He is, in a way, elemental of memory. Just because I am tapped into the system does not mean I have access to the power that allows it to operate. If I accessed it as you are suggesting, we would have miles of white noise --jumbled nonsense--to pick through before finding anything worthwhile. I simply do not have the power to handle it.



Fine. Then where is Smoke? Where are the others? Can you at least tell me that?

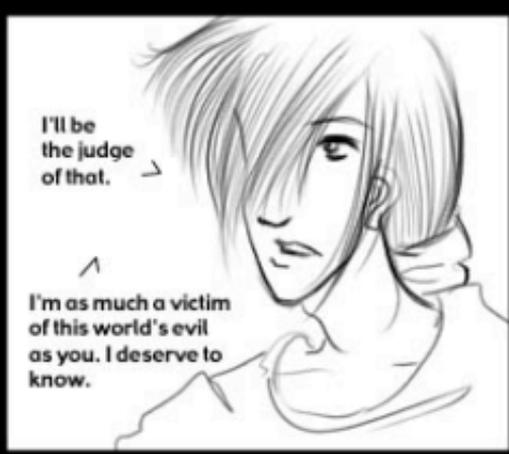
They're lost. They do not remember. They are better this way. You should leave them alone.

No. Rhodes is trying to take the easy way out, he's throwing this world away. I can't let him do that. Not after we've come this far.



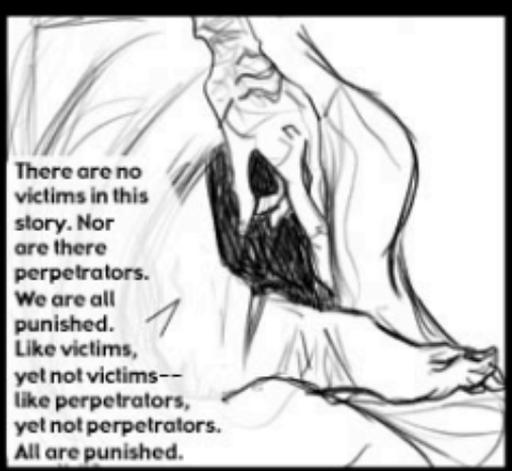
..Perhaps I should try to show you the story.

Then, perhaps, you'll understand why he wants to end all of this forever. There is great evil in this world. It is irredeemable.



I'll be the judge of that.

I'm as much a victim of this world's evil as you. I deserve to know.



There are no victims in this story. Nor are there perpetrators. We are all punished. Like victims, yet not victims-- like perpetrators, yet not perpetrators. All are punished.



I will try to do as you ask. But on two conditions.

What are those?

I need to be carried. Also, we look for water first.

So we got to leave the carmors' land with our lives, after all, with an elemental to boot. Though not exactly a great one.



I could tell Abe wasn't thrilled with the situation.



I suppose he must have envisioned elementals as more... impressive.

We got back to Abe's...

And we waited. And waited.

Fola was trying hard. At least it seemed that way.



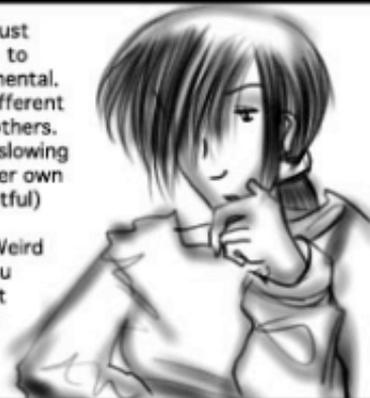
Abe asked him, "What about the time elemental? What is the matter with it? Why is time slowing?"

Fola looked up at that.. and thought.



"I can feel the others. But I cannot feel her at all," he said.

Something must be happening to the time elemental. Something different from all the others. She is either slowing time of our her own accord (doubtful) or Rhodes is forcing her. Weird how much you can figure out at the wrong end of the stick.



Winter was coming on and we all felt it, except maybe Abe, who was used to it...



I crocheted more clothes for Fola and I. I never thought I would sit and fantasize about going to department stores for socks and things. The concept of underpants was amazing to me.

Fola and Abe mostly ignored each other, to my relief. I don't think I could deal with the two of them if they started arguing. But I could tell Abe was getting antsy about the delay. I'd catch him staring at Fola as though gauging whether he was the genuine article or not.



A redundant activity...



... because a few days later, the beast woke.

Morse, sometimes they go crazy when their memories are restored. It has happened before.. I'll try to help but right now I have to go -- wake up, Morse wake up

**Curtis?! CURTIS!
WAIT! WAIT CURTIS!**



Morse, are you awake yet?

Huh..? Yeah.. yeah.. I was dreaming ... Curtis told me something..



I couldn't see him but I heard his voice... He said "they go crazy sometimes" ..

Sometimes? How about ALL the time? Anyway, Fola is awake. He says the memories are ready for us to look at.

You're ready then?

I should be asking you that.

Stop dallying around with that. I've seen enough horrible things, a few more won't make much of a difference.

Fine.

How will this work, then?

I don't know. I've never really done it before.

I imagine you'll appear to be in some sort of trance to anyone here, but your mind will be far away.

So Abe isn't going to watch?

I'd prefer to keep the baring of the elementals' dirty underwear to a minimal audience, but seeing as how I'm your 'servant' now, my opinion shouldn't sway you.

Save your breath, Folanerial. I'm not interested in anything you have to offer.

My my, on the uppity side, aren't we?

Oh please. If you two can't have a simple exchange without antagonizing each other, then save your stupidity for someone who gives a shit.

God. This is what I've been reduced to. Wearing a smock, telling horror stories to hicks.

All right. I'll show you the memories, but remember the deal.

We look for water first.

That's another thing. What do you MEAN by that?

I MEAN we look for Vivanerial first.

...WHA? I have no idea where any of them are or even how to look for them! I can't make a promise like that.

I won't meet with the other elementals without Vivanerial there.

We find him first.

I'm being punished for a past life. I just know it.

There's no telling how the others might treat me once we're back together. Vivanerial is the only one who I can trust.

It's a simple matter of self-preservation.

All right. Fine. How about this: Whether we find Viv or not, I'll make sure you're kept safe. Okay?

Agreed.

I have the sinking feeling I just made a deal with the devil.

Then again, at this point, that doesn't seem half bad...



All right. Here we go.



This should only take a moment.



Whoa. That was fast.

We're now inside a memory.



A commuter train? Where'd this come from?

I look what was sent to me.

Someone's talking to me... It's not Smoke, and it's certainly not any of the other elementals.



There it goes again--



Um. What just happened there?

Be quiet. Someone's trying to enter the memory. A minion.

Curtis!
It's gotta be Curtis!

Where do you get off keeping me out of the memory?!

I have no use for Lemanerillian minions, much less ones of shameful reputation.

Yeah well, kettle, pot, black, buddy. Your job here is done so you can go now.

Gladly.

Um...you and Abelarde behave yourselves, ok Fola?

Nnn.

Phew. Hardass.

What'd he do that was shameful?

Um, you'll see that for yourself. Right now I have to make a little clarification, philosophically speaking.

Have a seat.

Over the past 6 months you might've been wondering about all the things the wiwen system infers about the way this world operates.

Well.. I guess, kinda. Is Rhodes like..God here?

Good question, and that depends on what you mean by the word "god."

There is a similar theory to the wiwen model in your society called pantheism. It basically says that there is only one substance making up the entire universe, and that's god. Everything that we are and that makes the world around us is god or god's affections. The world exists as thoughts in god's mind. But this theory has problems. Free will cannot exist under these conditions.

There ARE worlds that operate that way. A wiwen can make up any rules he pleases, and he can deny his creations free will. These worlds die quickly, though, because they are not self-sustaining, they do not advance. Wiwens themselves operate on free will - free will is a universal that stretches over ALL universes. A wiwen NEEDS free will in order to create. Worlds that are devoid of free will cannot produce more wiwens. They're a dead end.

So there's no possibility of faking free will.

Exactly. It's a tautology. Nothing can imitate it or replace it. It's the fuel behind the entire wiwen system. It's the only way wiwens can reproduce.

What has this got to do with the elementals? >

Kid, we're discussing the makeup of the frigging universe. It has everything to do with them.



Basically what this comes down to is that Rhodes isn't omnipotent. He has to follow the rules he's created for this world. He wants to undo the world, but he can't, so he's doing the next best thing.



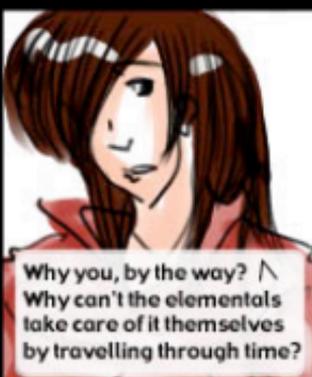
Stopping time?

Right. Wherever he is, he's got Ellioner prisoner, and he's forcing her to slow down time.

But...why is he doing such a thing? It's HIS world!



I have no idea, kid. I'm just the messenger, as usual.



Why you, by the way? Why can't the elementals take care of it themselves by travelling through time?

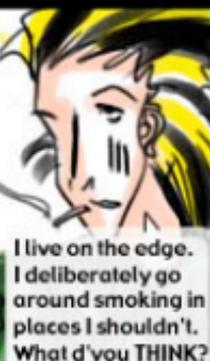


I'm dead. I don't go by this world's rules anymore. Cal sent me here to do what he couldn't.



Okay... What's with the train, then?

(You can't smoke that here, you know.)



I live on the edge. I deliberately go around smoking in places I shouldn't. What d'you THINK?



Look over there.



Oh my god -- it's Fern and Mid! What are they doing here?!



Why don't you go ask them?

Fern...?

Did you hear something, Mid?

Ngh...no..

sigh
Are we almost there?

'bout
forty more
minutes. >

He can't see or hear me..

Hrmmm. Damn.
They sure don't
make these things
easy.

I'll explain...Well, I'll
sum up. Fern and
Mid are taking an
um... extended
vacation.

Fern packed up their bags one day, dragged Mid out of bed, and left with him. They're on their way to Asize, a predominantly human settlement city west of Tower.

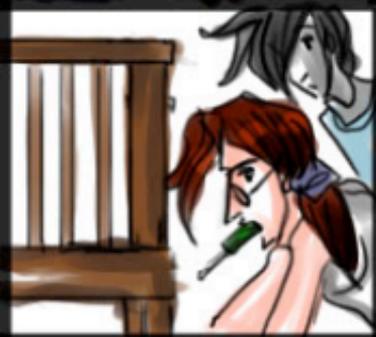
But...Isn't Cal
angry? Is he
going to hurt
them?

No..but I ... really dunno why, Morse. S'not my area of expertise, you know, translating elemental behavior. Heh. Cal is in one of those unresponsive states, or close to it, and frankly, I think he's more scared of Fern at this point than vice versa, and Fern knows it...

He's taking Mid to Asize so he can have a taste of what a normal life is like.

Mid's depression had gotten to a point where Fern had to do something...

It wouldn't
be the first
time.



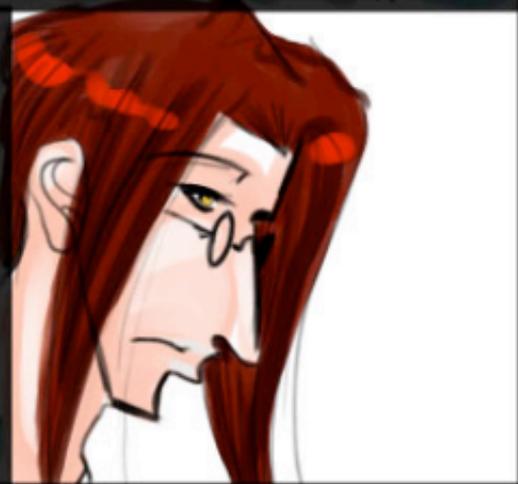
What do we do now?

Tomorrow I look for a job.

I don't know how we're going to live around all of these humans...with barely any money..

You're just culture shocked, is all. You'd feel the same anywhere. You've been stuck in the house for years.

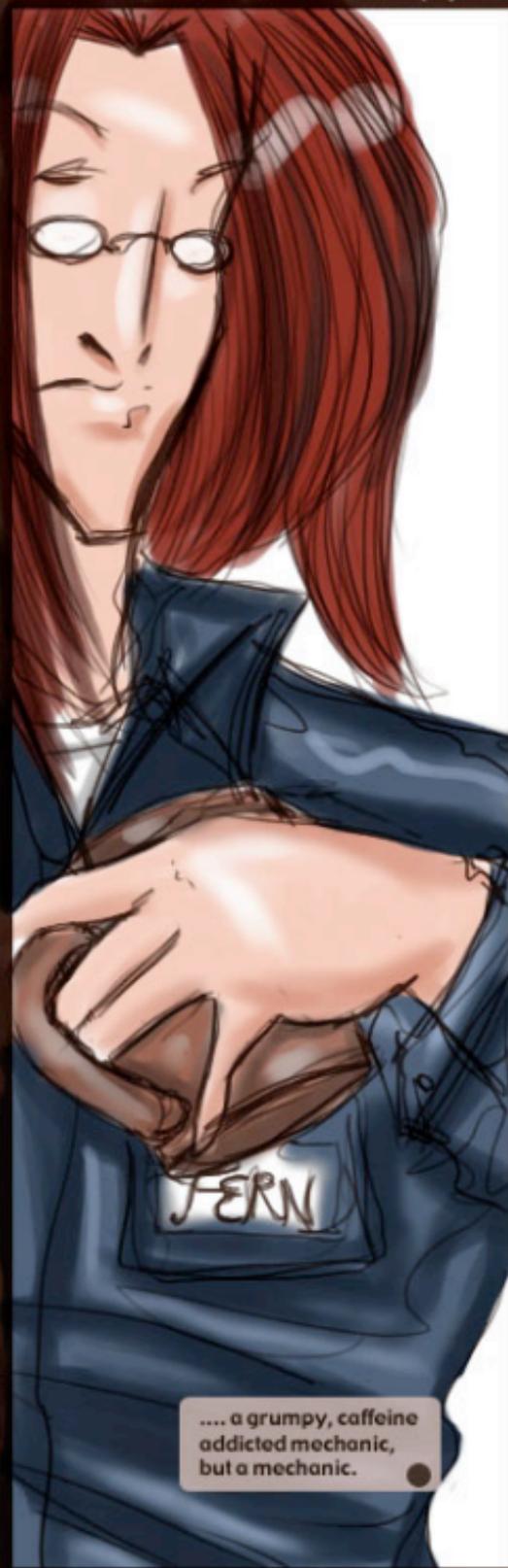
Yeah.. I have to get used to being stared at again.



Domestic life was weird at first.
But it was fun, playing house.



Fern got a job as a
mechanic.



.... a grumpy, caffeine
addicted mechanic,
but a mechanic.



Then, one night...



Mid... Mid
wake up



...Who's there?
Am I dreaming?



Yes. You're
dreaming.
There's
nothing
to be
scared of.
I'm a friend.



You sound really familiar...

I have visited before.. But I did not stay long.

So strange... I feel like I know you. Where
are you? Can I see you?

Well... Yes... if you wish...

Yes. Please.



...Here I am.



Oh.. wow..
See, was that
so hard?

So um..What exactly are you?

I guess you could call me elemental of dreams...

Which would make you... um. Wiwenerial?

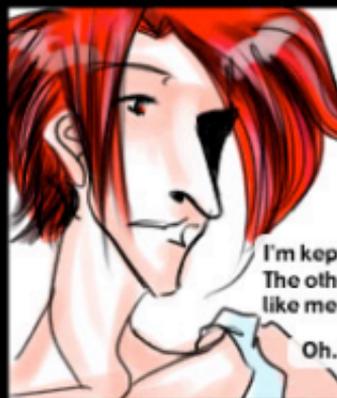
...yeah.. but you can call me Rae.



Er...okay.. But why haven't I heard of you before, then?

I'm kept locked up. The others... don't like me.

Oh.. Why not?



Jealous, I think.

Are you cold? Here, this should be warmer.

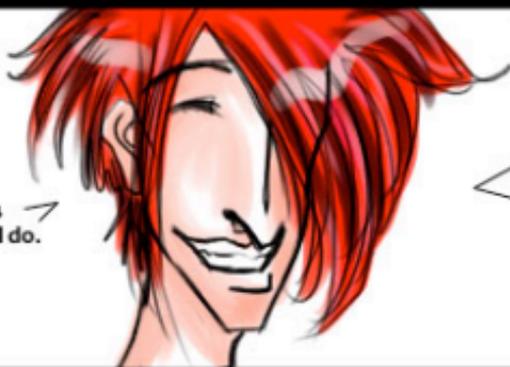
Whoa.. Yeah, this is warmer. Thank you. You really control all dreams, then?



Yes! That's what I do.

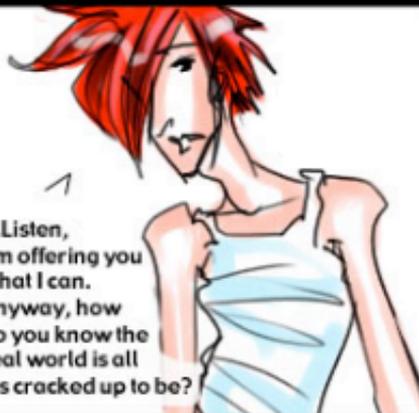
If there's anything you want, I'll get it for you.

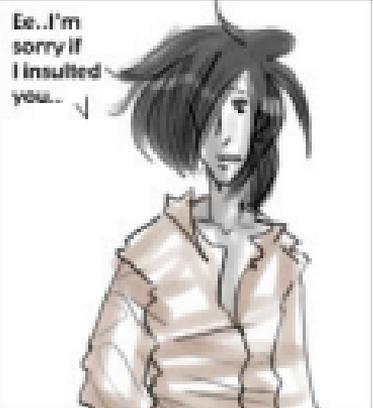
I mean *anything*. I want you to be happy.



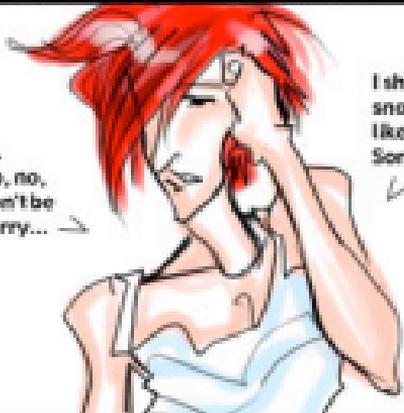
Um..Thanks I guess, but it'd only be a dream, right? It won't change the real world.

...Listen, I'm offering you what I can. Anyway, how do you know the real world is all it's cracked up to be?





Es..I'm sorry if I insulted you..



I shouldn't've snapped atcha like that... Sorry.

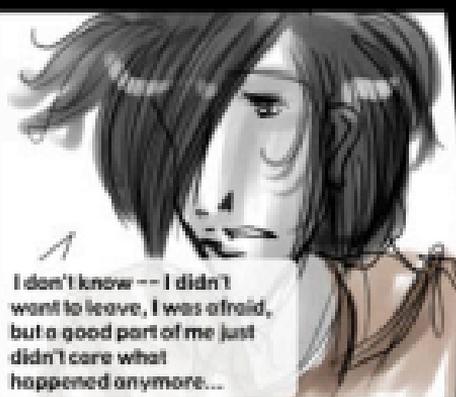
.... No, no, don't be sorry...



It's just... everything seems like a dream now. You're right. There isn't much to my 'reality' right now... Nothing feels right. I wish I could find something...solid.



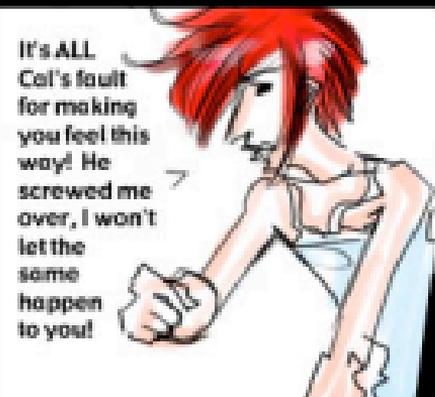
Yeah... So um.. That's why you ran away? From Col, I mean.



I don't know -- I didn't want to leave, I was afraid, but a good part of me just didn't care what happened anymore...



He's so ... weird and unpredictable, I don't even know what to do ... I just hold on to Fern and try to keep breathing, all the time...I feel like such a child.



It's ALL Col's fault for making you feel this way! He screwed me over, I won't let the same happen to you!



Whoa.. What.. I mean what did he do to you?

He's so angry...

**Weeks
Later**

You seem awfully
cheerful tonight.
Something happen?



Um. Would you believe me
if I said that this tea was
just really good?



... If I had tripe for brains,
and you didn't say
it like that, yeah.

What is it?



Hee. Okay,
I'll tell you, but
you have to
promise not
to flip out.



What?!
This is
flipout
material?!
INFORMATION!
NOW!



I think...um.
I think I've
met someone.

I knew it. Who must I kill, then?



Would you
get a grip?





How did you MEET this guy? You barely ever leave the house, much less talk to anybody!

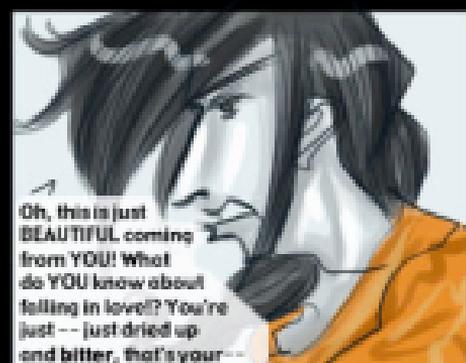


What have you been up to with him? ... You must be covered in mortal cooties, and here I've been sleeping in the same bed--

Oh for crying out loud, I should have known you wouldn't understand any of this.



Don't you DARE say that to me. Why do you think we're here at all?! I'm trying to PROTECT you and you throw away the safety I've worked hard to achieve for the sake of some idiotic fling--



Oh, this is just BEAUTIFUL coming from YOU! What do YOU know about falling in love!? You're just -- just dried up and bitter, that's your--



Oh god -- oh god, Fern -- I'm sorry --



You fucking adolescent.

Get your hands off your face, and don't you dare tell me you're sorry. You don't value my forgiveness and I have no relief in giving it.



I'm working overtime tomorrow. I'm going to bed.



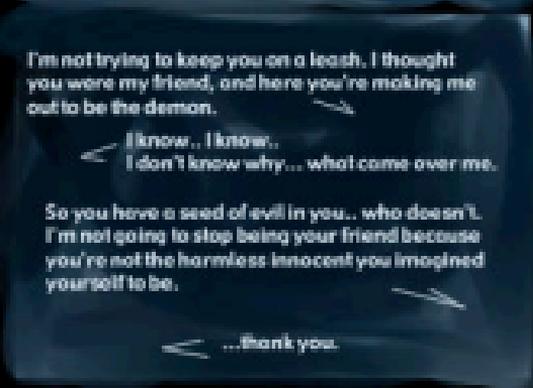
Fern?

Just shut up and get in bed.



I...really am sorry.

I can't even comprehend what that meant to you. But I'm sorry... Sorry for wanting to hurt you at all.



I'm not trying to keep you on a leash. I thought you were my friend, and here you're making me out to be the demon.

I know.. I know.. I don't know why... what came over me.

So you have a seed of evil in you.. who doesn't. I'm not going to stop being your friend because you're not the harmless innocent you imagined yourself to be.

...thank you.



So. This guy makes you happy, hm?

Yeah... I mean... I don't know... he does, but there's something ... not right about it.



But I guess I wouldn't know, would I?

...Have you ever been in love, Fern?

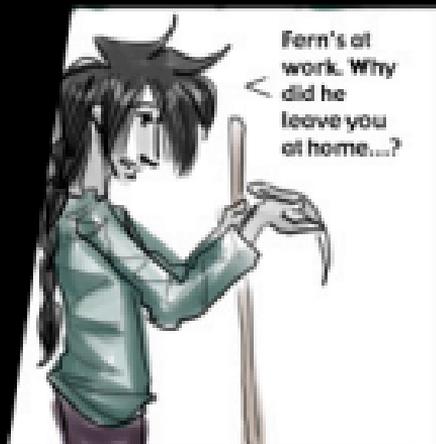
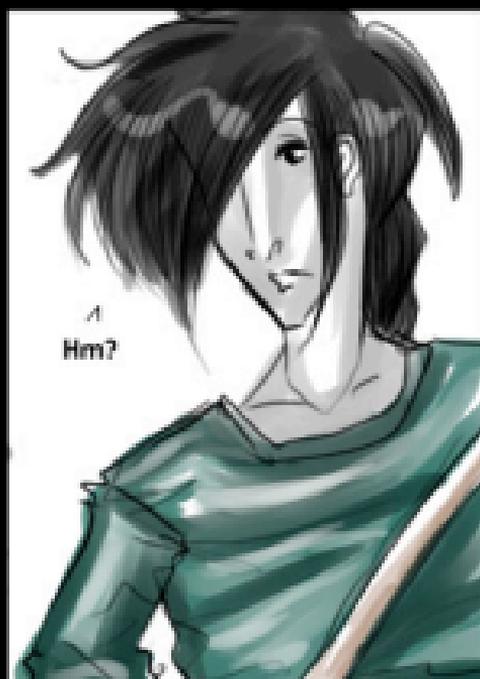
Yeah.

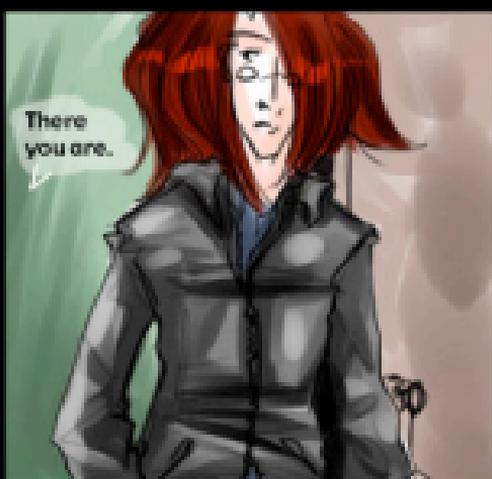


What's it like?

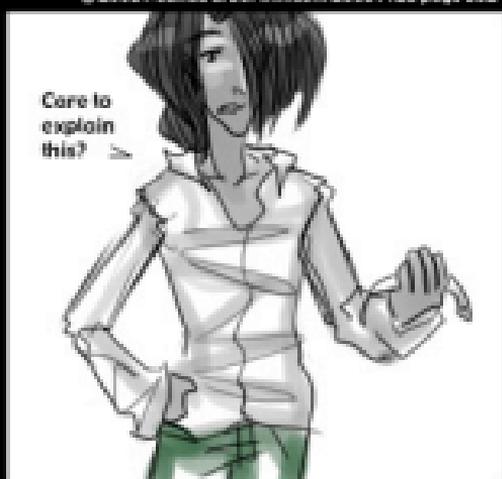
It isn't.

a year later.

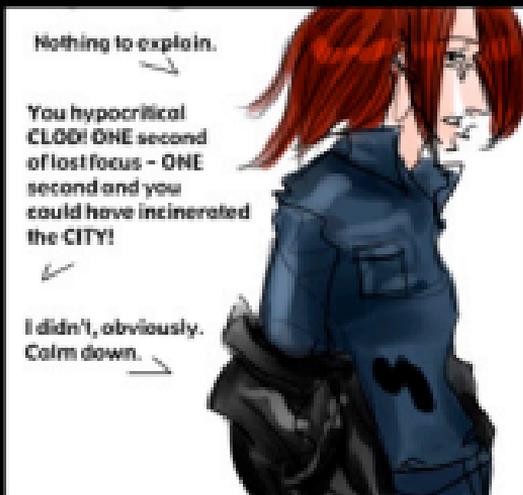




There you are.



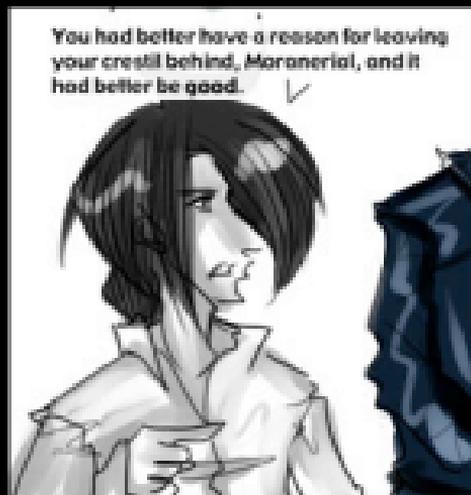
Come to explain this?



Nothing to explain.

You hypocritical CLOD! ONE second of lost focus - ONE second and you could have incinerated the CITY!

I didn't, obviously. Calm down.



You had better have a reason for leaving your crest behind, Moranerial, and it had better be good.



I believe we had a conversation years ago when we came here about the effects of longterm leave from the primary...One of which is crest malfunction in the formation of new tissue...



Oh god.

Fern, why didn't you tell me...

We predicted this would happen. There's no reason to get upset. This is what we are.



Oh, that's rich --- This is what we are, but what is it, then? What is it?

Mid---

THIS IS CANCER! This is **OUR OWN FLESH** turning against us because we wanted to be **FREE** for just a **LITTLE** while! **THIS IS IMPRISONMENT!**

WHUMP

This is **WRONG** and I am **RIGHT**, we deserve **BETTER** than this! I **KNOW** better, I **KNOW**, I **KNOW**!

Shut up, shut up. None of it's fair. None of it. It's all wrong.

....

"snrk"
So it's cancer. How far along is it? Where?

It's early yet...my right lung.



I don't have my books with me...
But when you have all your books
in your head, I guess that doesn't
really matter.

Flaws in the crestil system were predicted early, but were ignored.

Crestils operate like super enhanced immune systems, and therefore have all the advantages and disadvantages of a normal mortal immune system -- thousandfold. Part of the crestil's job is to heal and regenerate damaged tissue in the elementals' bodies to make them last almost indefinitely. Crestils know how to fight against normal pathogens -- bacteria, viral infection, any alien bodies. They're so effective: the women can't wear them while pregnant; the crestil will kill the baby as a foreign object.

But cancer is another story. With cancer, the body is killing itself. Most of the time crestils can detect damaged DNA and replace it. Sometimes that works, sometimes not.. Sometimes it cannot tell there's damaged DNA at all. Then it's too late.

Crestils are powerful. They make powerful cells. If cancer cells form, they are just as tough to kill as normal cells. They reproduce just as quickly, if not faster because of their lack of specialization. Unspecialized cancer cells can eat up the body's resources, replace the organs with worthless tissue, devour an elemental until he's simply a mind trapped in an unusable, utterly deformed body...too weakened to form a new one. Yet if you try to stop the progression of the cancer, you kill the body. The result is the same.



Being far away
from one's
primary is one of
the causes
of genetic
damage...



Destroying the body entirely
and forming a new one will
only delay the inevitable.
The crestil will still have the flaw.
The cancer will regrow, possibly
even worse than before.
The effects are cumulative.
Strange how healing can hurt you.
So few people understand that..



I guess we'll
be seeing
you again soon,
Cal.

Who? Oh.. But er, are you sure?

Gee, I don't know, since I ASKED for it and all.

Well it's kind of daunting in a way..

Just give me that thing.

The fourth wall makes a weird noise going down.

Like.. Sploot.

Nononono, more like, SPLGFDG/hghjff.

....Fucking idiot.

It does!

Is it on?

thap thap
Yeah yeah, I think we're all on.

All right then. I just thought I'd take the liberty to claim the spotlight for a few minutes..

for the sake of clearing up some personal details.

Personal details?

Well he sings the Froggie Rock theme in the tub..

And as for clarity --
AAH! NO!!
OKAY OKAY
SORRY I'LL STOP!

Ahem. Although this story is being accurately depicted insofar as certain perspectives are concerned, I would like to draw your attention to its subjectivity.

I have been presented, for example, as having many different roles, some of which contradict each other. If you find this strange, you are probably one of those lucky individuals who have very little in the way of self contradiction. Count it as a blessing that you are devoid of it... or at least, unaware of it.

Oh. Yeah, I have something to say, too. Is this going to Horse or the audience?

Everybody.

Right then, I'd just like to say --

Fern, would you kindly--

We're on the air?

Yeah Smoke, fire away.

Hi people.

This is going out specifically to Soshi and Zor, but the rest of you are just a culpable.

I KNOW about the things you sick fucks out there do. Heed this, and heed it well: Just cus I'm fictional doesn't mean I can't kick your ass. I know where you live.

What was I saying?



Back to the story... Wow, Fern, even after that, how long did it take for us to actually go back?

A couple of months at least. We put it off.

Yes...By the time you arrived you were much worse.



Hey, Smoke.. What were doing by yourself all that time?

Filling in for you two.

Oh.. Thanks!



Can't we just skip over this part altogether? It's not like we haven't aired enough of our personal business already. Morse doesn't have to know the details. I got sick, I got better, the end.



Fern, you may not remember it, but when you got sick Col helped take care of you. It's important for Col's sake to tell this.

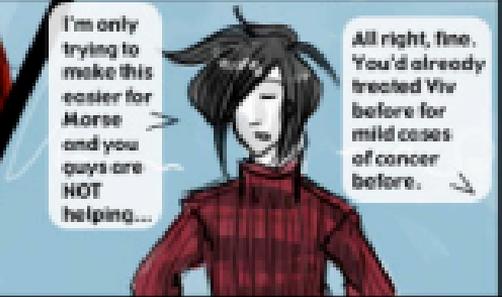
But I don't want to talk about it either! it was horrible!



x_X Col...

So what, Mid? No one has the right to analyze us --

Oh shush. That sort of attitude isn't going to get us ANYwhere.



I'm only trying to make this easier for Morse and you guys are NOT helping...

All right, fine. You'd already treated Viv before for mild cases of cancer before.



Huh? I heard my name. Am I supposed to talk now?



So what was needed to treat me was not altogether unfamiliar to you. You started work --

No, Viv...



Umph. I wish there was a comic about the Mayanercillions. We don't get enough attention.

The comic industry already has enough porn.



Guys, can we please try to stay on topic? Sheez.

Oh, burn.



What about you, Col? Get us back on track?

I like porn.

Well, I'll continue anyway...

We installed Fern in his room... No hospital would have helped him.

And as long as he was ill he was a danger to everyone around him...

Cal had been immersed in business for quite some time... put aside everything personal.

He was understandably ... perturbed when I told him what was wrong.

But it turns out he has an amazing bedside manner... he stayed by Fern night and day...

While I was stuck in my place with the machines, trying to make a crestil to slow the spread of the cancer.

I learned, not for the first time, how ugly the sick are...

We took his crestil away too late, after he had lost a little of his mind... It's not nice seeing an adult scream, wheedle, bargain, beg like a child...

It took years... three or four, I don't know, it seemed like a century.

We were all praying for the normal level of misery...

All we had to look forward to.

When Fern got better, we returned to nice, normal, branch-ish activities.

Like the annual mandatory reading of our 'fanmail.'

People wrote letters to us like children write to Santa Claus....

When Fern first told me about it, I was excited...

But Cal and the others hated doing it for a reason.

Boss Hit form letter. Wait a sec, I have to make more copies of that one.

"Deer Kalanorreal, you killd my hammster spuggy I hate you and I hope yor pets die to bye, Mark." Pet death form letter.

Another one who wants to have their boss killed, Cal.

The sympathetic ones were perhaps even worse...

"Callanerial, we are soul mates. We have not yet met, but I feel like I've known you my entire life, and I am pregnant with your baby.."

"my mom doesnt get it that Im like a vampyre and stuff. your all like, weird guys so do u have any advice?? love Kristi"

"Dear Mid, Wow man your really hot but your skin is really gross and turns me way off."

"Here's a check for plastic surgery!! it's a shame for someone so hot tbe nasty and gray! No need to thank me."

Somewhere along the line Fern explodes...

What the fuck is **WRONG** with these **IDIOTS**?! How do they **SURVIVE** being this **STUPID**, **HOW** do they even know to get up in the morning? **HOW DID THEY LIVE THROUGH ADOLESCENCE**?! I THOUGHT NATURE WAS SUPPOSED TO SELECT AGAINST PEOPLE LIKE THESE! [etc]

I don't know, dear.

..which lets us know he's feeling better.

Fern was our only real connection to the other branches... The relationships between the secondary elementals has been the most consistent and longlasting source of branch solidarity, strangely enough. So we got a little news of what was happening with the others through him... Unfortunately, the news wasn't good.

Eight hours of discussion and in the end he decides to throw away the whole project...

Well, what can you expect..It's Lem.

Yeah, but still, he's been more obstinate than ever lately....

I'm worried about Fola...I asked him to come with us for dinner after the meeting like we always do...

He just turned away like he hadn't even heard me!

He's just being a prick, Ell. Don't let him hurt your feelings.

He can join us when he stops sulking.

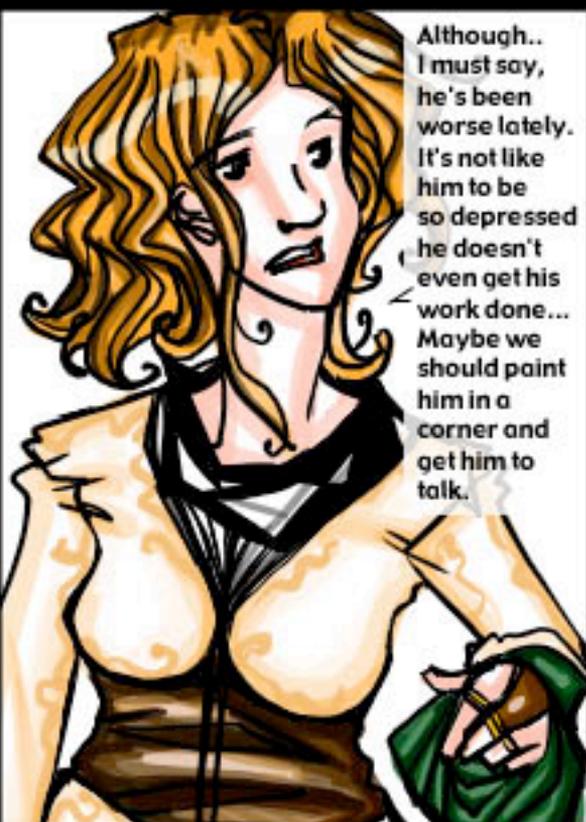


Although.. I must say, he's been worse lately. It's not like him to be so depressed he doesn't even get his work done... Maybe we should paint him in a corner and get him to talk.

Don't bother. He doesn't give a damn when we're ill. I say let him suffer.

Nice 'fude, Fern.

Heeeey, I'm starved, let's say we get dinner huh?





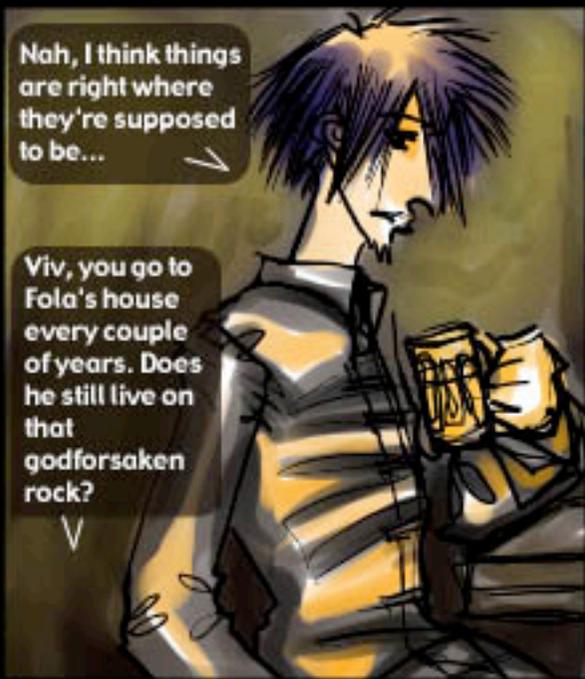
There IS the fact that Fola spends more time with Lem than the rest of us combined... ✓

So what? Fola likes to work. He's got nothing better to do.

I'm just saying we should be grateful to him for picking up the slack!

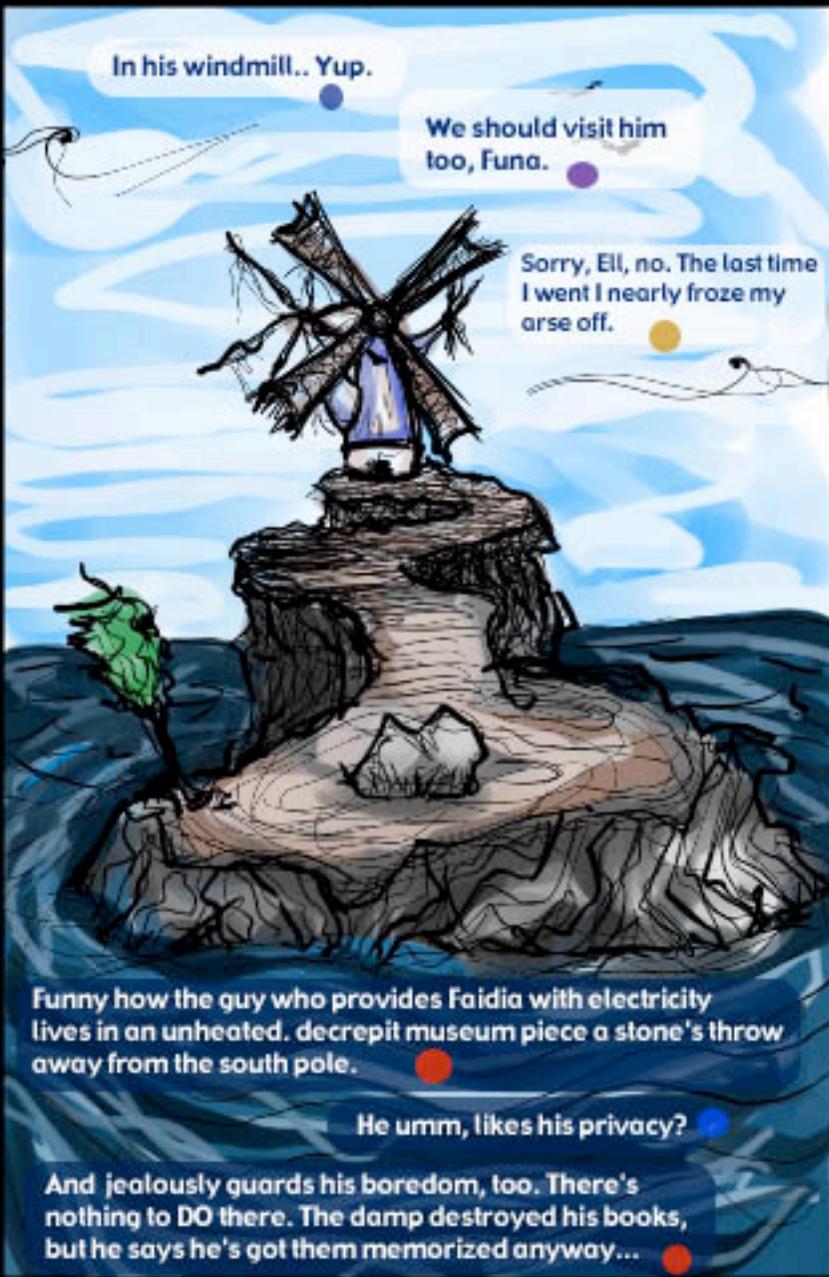
Slack that wouldn't exist if Lem weren't such a boob.

I sometimes think Fola and Viv got their primaries switched around...



Nah, I think things are right where they're supposed to be... ✓

Viv, you go to Fola's house every couple of years. Does he still live on that godforsaken rock?



In his windmill.. Yup. ●

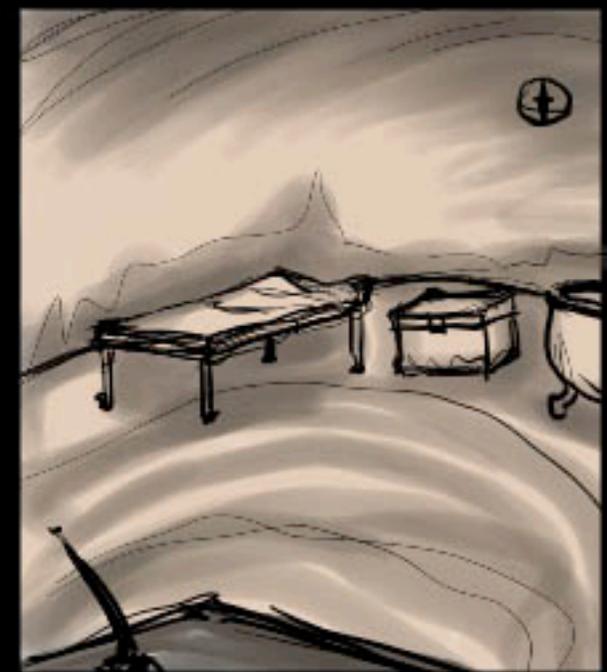
We should visit him too, Funa. ●

Sorry, Ell, no. The last time I went I nearly froze my arse off. ●

Funny how the guy who provides Faidia with electricity lives in an unheated, decrepit museum piece a stone's throw away from the south pole. ●

He umm, likes his privacy? ●

And jealously guards his boredom, too. There's nothing to DO there. The damp destroyed his books, but he says he's got them memorized anyway... ●





Please wait for us in the hall, Vivian.

Yes sir..

Well well... Vivian has certainly grown up, hasn't she. What a waste... She adores you, you know.

She adores her work.

Don't be thick. You ARE her work.

I've drawn a line between the personal and public realm, if you don't mind.

If you're going to imitate Fern, you might as well do it without failing so spectacularly. How I'd love to actually have a secondary with that much backbone...

Goodnight sir.

Well, if you're not going to --

You have enough minions of your own without harrasing mine. You are not to touch her.

And what if I do? What in the world could you do to stop me?

Glare balefully at me?

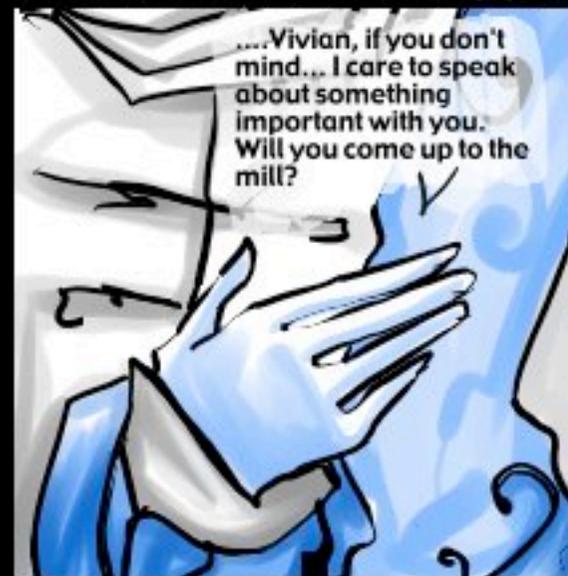
It's about time you grew up, Fola.



Home and again, sir.



Mm well...Lem attempts to endear himself to various minority groups through easily mimicked cultural cues... As a result his wardrobe leans towards the eclectic.

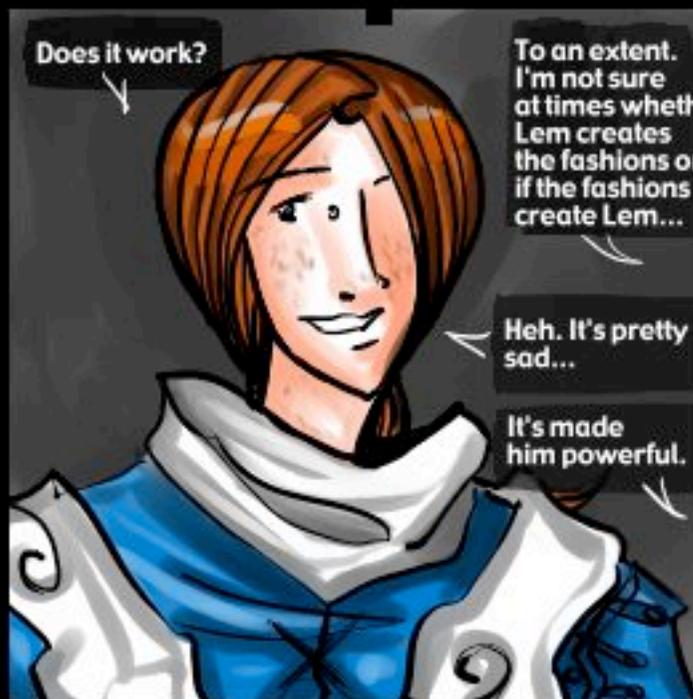


...Vivian, if you don't mind... I care to speak about something important with you. Will you come up to the mill?



The isle's a relief after Tower, isn't it? There's so little room to breathe there...

By the way, do you know what Lem was wearing? I've never seen clothing like that before.



Does it work?

To an extent. I'm not sure at times whether Lem creates the fashions or if the fashions create Lem...

Heh. It's pretty sad...

It's made him powerful.



Why does he even need to ask...?

Of course, sir.

...Call me Fola, please.



....h-hello? Where am I?

Mmph.. I can't move...



Folanerial?



...Fola, you don't smoke.



I'm feeling finite.

Isn't that a rather strange thing to say, considering your circumstances?



Er... What circumstances are those, exactly? Why'm I here, and why can't I move?

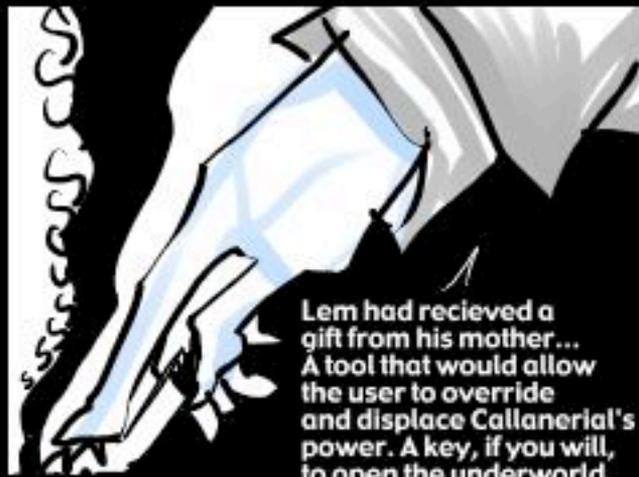
I doubt this is the first time you've been restrained with an air charm.

Er..well, no.. Have I done something wrong? Where are Cal and--

I'm going to tell you a little story.

You will not recall this because it was purged from your memory, but as Lem's attempt to acquire you failed, he fought for a compromise instead. That compromise constituted certain... installations which were kept secret. Callanerial's requirement was that these installations would cause no harm to you... And they did not.

He had no idea what we had for a trump card.



Lem had recieved a gift from his mother... A tool that would allow the user to override and displace Callanerial's power. A key, if you will, to open the underworld.

It required a direct conduit into the lagoon, or it would be worthless. You were that connection. It should be more than potent enough now to work.



I personally performed the surgery when Cal provided your body for the installations. Do you know why Lem gave me, of all people, that task?



B-because he trusts you?

No..no. Nothing so nearly as substantive as that. He gave me the task because I am domesticated.

I was not about to cause any trouble, now was I?



Be quiet. No one hears you.



Fola..Fola don't do this--

The problem with you--with me, with everyone--is that we assumed evil was autonomous.

Lemerial likes to think that you are all the evil in the world. YOU like to think that you are all that is evil in the world. You lie in bed at night and think, If only I could be Normal. If only I could follow Their Rules.

But you see, Midnight, I followed the rules.
I followed them more closely than anyone.

There is nothing to get, there.



Nothing to get in breaking them either, but you should know that.

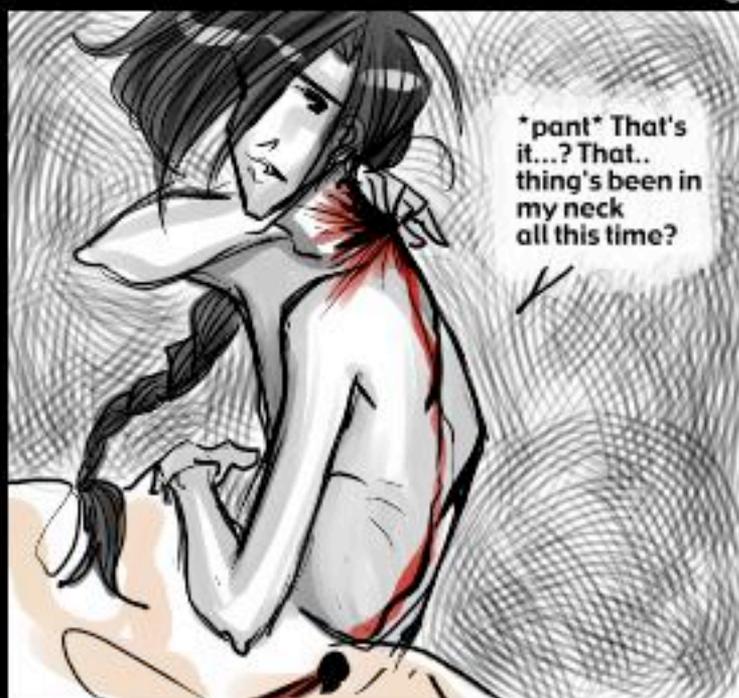
Fola...
Fola, don't DO this.
It's wrong.

Intelligent boy.

You hit upon the exact reason why I am doing it.

Don't worry. I won't sever
any of your long, pretty hair.





pant That's it...? That.. thing's been in my neck all this time?



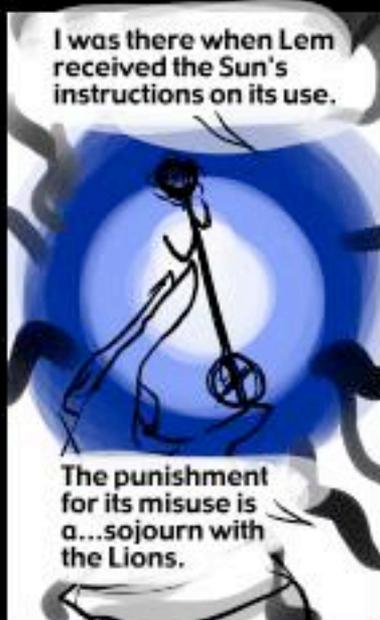
It's been nearly three millennia since I held it in my hands... I am still the same. Nothing has changed. How horrible that is.



....



Fola...it's not too late, Fola.. Think of what they'll do to you, Fola...



I was there when Lem received the Sun's instructions on its use.

The punishment for its misuse is a...sojourn with the Lions.



Th...The Lions?! FOLA! WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?! You can't possibly think they're going to KILL you?!

I'm not looking for release. I want to look Her in the eye. I'm looking for the power to fear again.



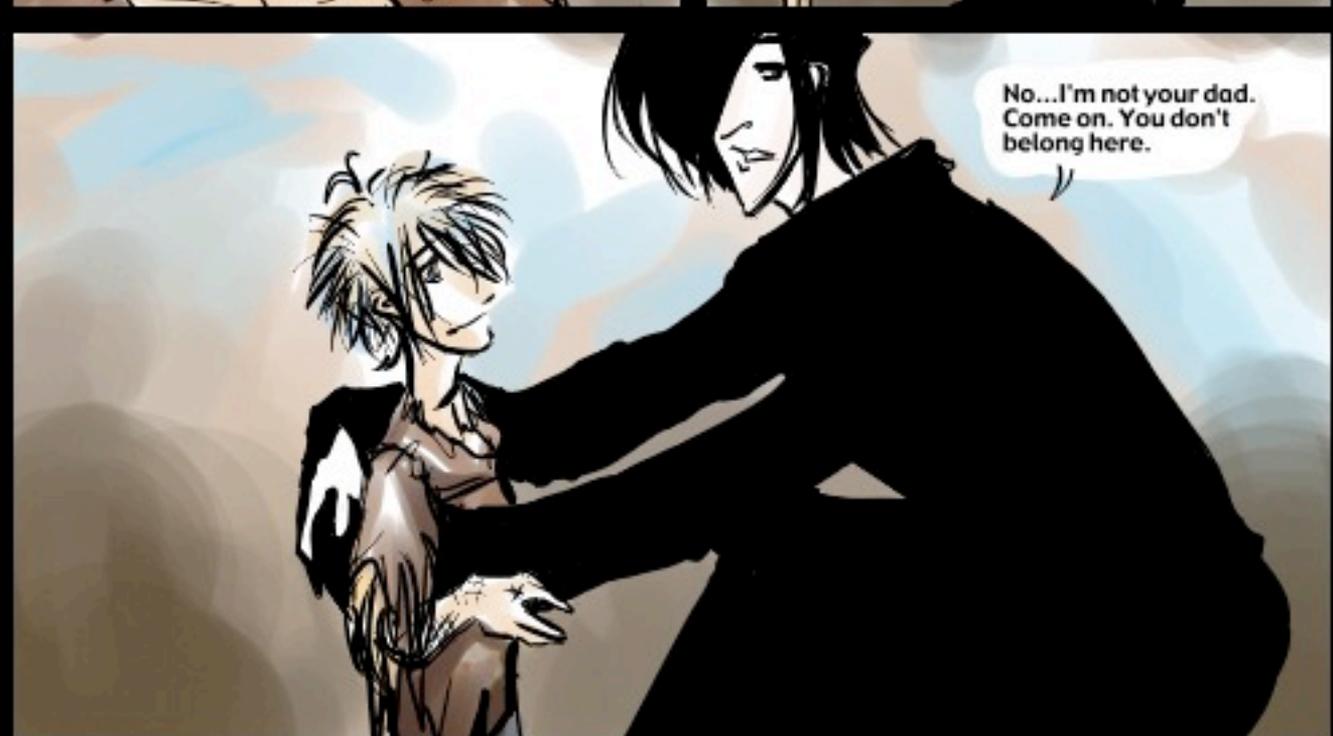
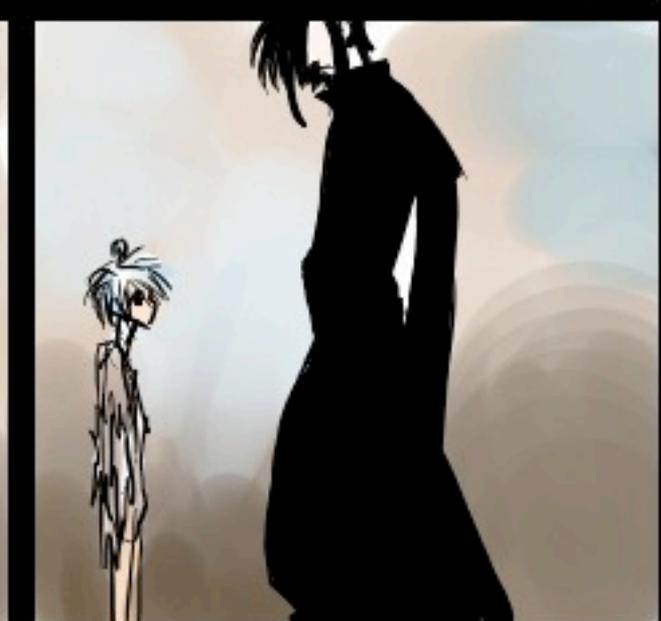
I haven't
screamed
like that since...





...Ew.





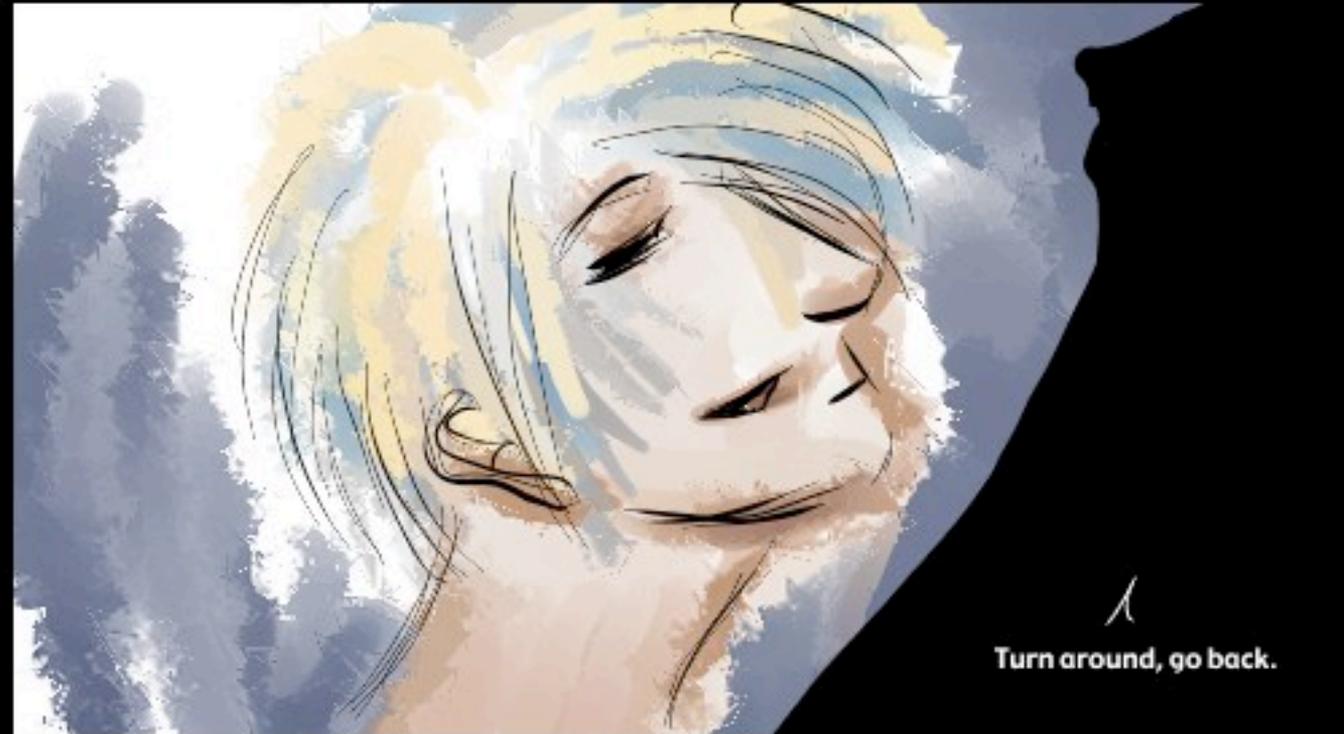


Oooh.
What's that?
Are you doing it?

Yes.



Do it again, do it again!



Turn around, go back.

Of course it didn't fucking work!
He's a secondary! Look at him!

Is Mid all right, Cal?

Yes, yes he's going to be fine...
If a little **SHOCKED** by Lemaneriallian
STUPIDITY.

LISTEN, I by no
means
ADVOCATED
this behavior--

You are
an **INCOMPETENT**
BOOB.

You had the **AUDACITY**
to harbor this ridiculous
thing as a **WEAPON**
without my knowledge.
You made a **CONTRACT**
with the fucking **SUN**,
Lem. Don't you know
how dangerous that is?!

I wasn't about to tell
you about a deal
that involved
your displacement,
Cal. All is fair in
love and war.

That was part of our mother's
deal, and I kept my side
of the promise.

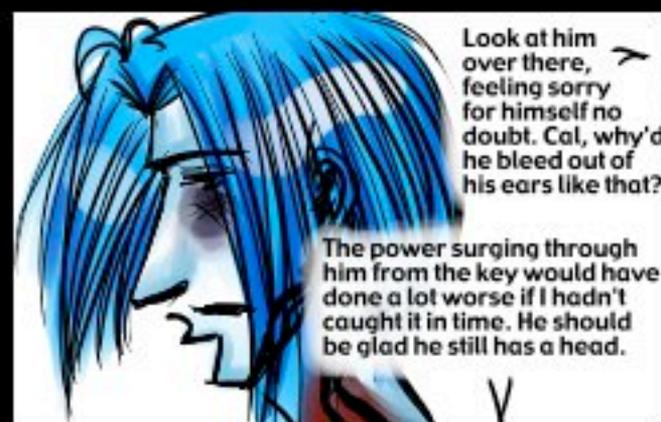
Lem, Lem, Lem. Don't
you know by now that
the only power she has
anymore is power we
give to her? I owe her
nothing. But I'll be there,
when her time comes.



And now, because you're a dust-sniffing Yahoo, we have to inflict the ultimate punishment on a perfectly functional secondary. Good show.

Spare me, PLEASE. Why do we have to wear this getup, anyway?

It's a ritual. Not a catwalk.



Look at him over there, feeling sorry for himself no doubt. Cal, why'd he bleed out of his ears like that?

The power surging through him from the key would have done a lot worse if I hadn't caught it in time. He should be glad he still has a head.



All right, we're here.

whimper

Now all we need is Viv.

Eil...please...



F-fola, h-how COULD you?! Why didn't you TELL us th--there was something wrong?!

I know we're idiots but you c--could at least've given us a chance--



Fola, FOLA! Why won't y--you look at me? PLEASE Fola--

Eil... Eil...

Get her away from there!



We're going t--to hurt him now, aren't we? AREN'T WE? I don't want to hurt him! I don't want to, I can't, I won't hurt him--

Funa, take Eil aside and calm her down, please.

She's hysterical, I knew she would be.

I'm not sure about this...

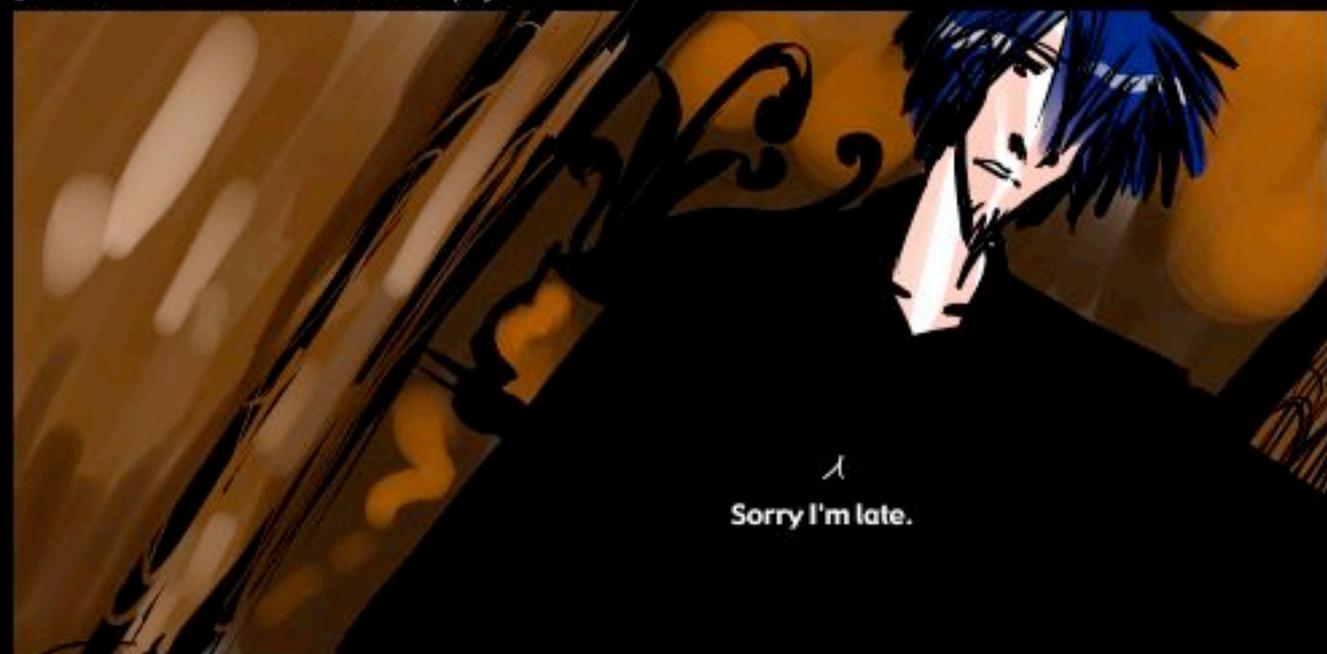
She'll do as she's told.

That's not the point.

What is, then?

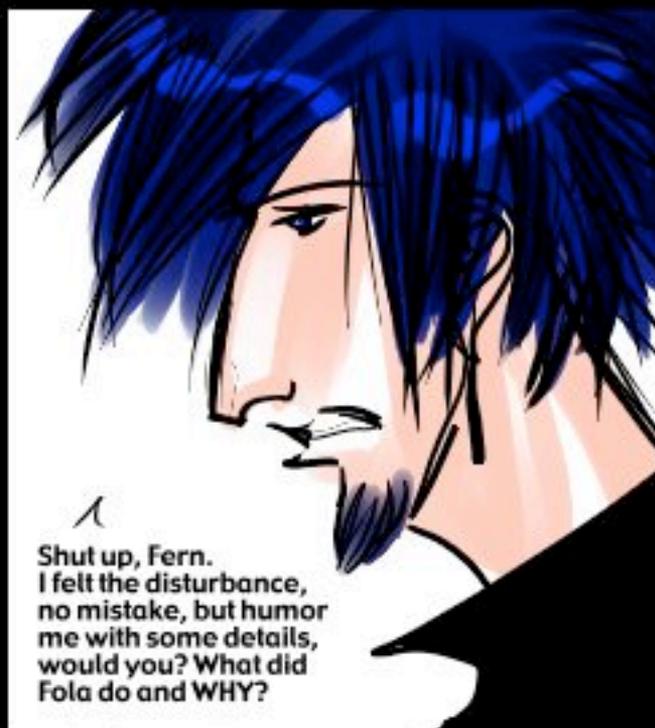
Yes, yes..

We HAVE to.

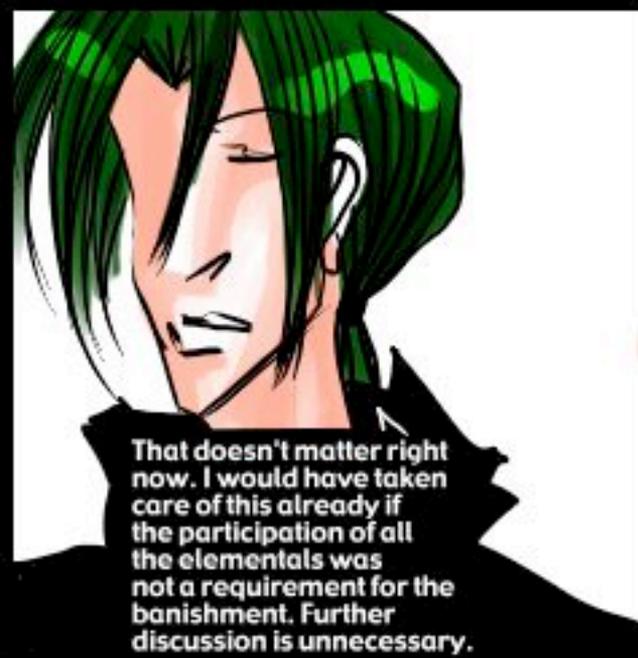


Sorry I'm late.

Finally. Let's give this slob what he deserves then, shall we?



Shut up, Fern. I felt the disturbance, no mistake, but humor me with some details, would you? What did Fola do and WHY?



That doesn't matter right now. I would have taken care of this already if the participation of all the elementals was not a requirement for the banishment. Further discussion is unnecessary.



Nevertheless. I'm not contributing a thing until I hear the full story.

All right, Fola. Here's your chance to explain yourself. Do you know what you've done?



I had one of my minions call on Mid to ask for his assistance. She brought him to a suitably isolated location and stunned him before delivering him to my home. I opened his spine with a scalpel and a surgical saw so I could remove the key. I used the key to try and displace Callanerial.



Tch. Bet you're sorry now.



I regret NOTHING, and I would do it AGAIN if I had to!



... Shut your mouth. Not another word.

If I had my way I'd make sure I never heard your voice again. Shut up.



I'd like to know how he can explain himself if you won't let him speak.



Allow me to explain this one more time, in small words you'll be sure to understand.

NOTHING he can say now will change his punishment. He knew what he was doing, and he will pay the proper price.



And so shall we. Has it occurred to you how this will effect the branches?

Fola's minions will either die instantly or go mad, and every one else will experience the aftershocks. Are we prepared for that?



I'm well aware of that, May.

I'm not exactly thrilled. But we haven't got a choice.

Oh, well. Silly me. I didn't know it was as cut and dry as all that.

I would just like to point out that if it were I that had done something like this, I somehow doubt we'd be standing around talking about it. I'd be halfway to the lions by now, at least.

So, what, Fern? Are you advocating that your treatment is the correct kind? As wronged as you have been, I'd think that it would give you an incentive to not do the same to others.

All right, everyone stop bickering... it's not simplifying anything..

Fola knew what he was doing... Knew the consequences... Now, what do we do about it?

Sir? I have the air minion you wanted. She insisted on speaking to you right away.

Didn't I tell you that this was a meeting for elementals only?! NO MINIONS, get her out of here!

Stop right there! Let her speak.

That's it, I've had ENOUGH, Vivanerial. We'll never finish these proceedings if you continue to DISREGARD MY ORDERS.



Perhaps I wouldn't HAVE to if you weren't making a FARCE out of this, LEMANERIAL, leaving the rest of us to clean up your mess!



This isn't one of your fucking GAMES, wake up to the fact, would you?!

Both of you shut up.

I want to hear her speak.

Let her come forward.

This is ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous.

I told you to be QUIET, Lem.



H-he... Folanerial.. Talked with me last night.. before the incident..

And? What did he say?

He told me I had to bring Midnight to him... He only told me... He was going to do something h-horrible... And that the others and I would suffer ... That he was sorry, but this was something he needed to do...

I tried to convince him not to... But he wouldn't listen.. You HAVE to talk to h-him, he's not in his right mind--



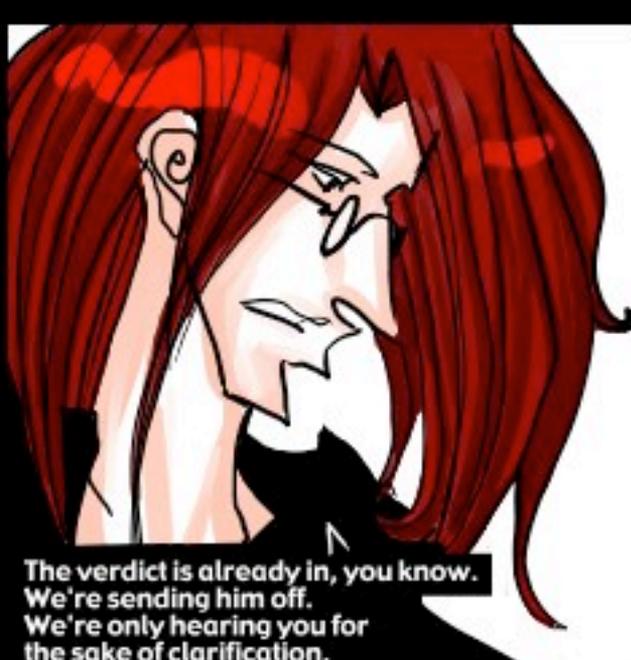
W-what..? Just like that..?

He was... He was right..

But..but... Y-you can't...



The verdict is already in, you know. We're sending him off. We're only hearing you for the sake of clarification.





Oh yes, we can.
It's what he
deserves.
This is the
proper punishment.



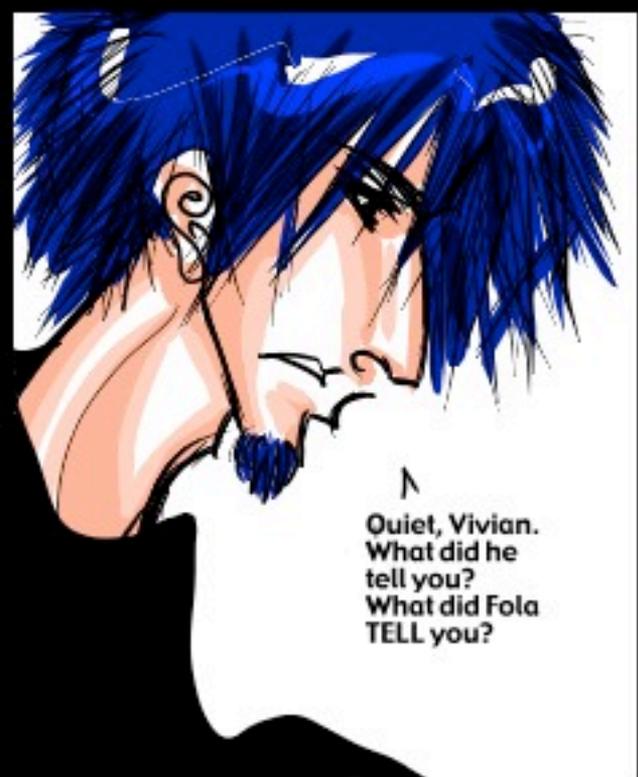
Who are YOU
to say that?!

You don't know
what's **WRONG** with
him! How in the
WORLD is this going
to help **ANYBODY**!?!
**YOU'RE JUST MAKING
IT WORSE!**



Get her **OUT** of
here --

It's the sun, isn't it?! **SHE**
says, **SHE** told you, **SHE'S**
right -- how can you believe
her after all this time?!
There's **NO REASON!** She's
done nothing but **LIE** from
the start and you're so ready
to believe her when you're
too **SCARED** and **STUPID**--



Quiet, Vivian.
What did he
tell you?
What did Fola
TELL you?



He said... He had to do it. That he
had no other choice. No exit.

I said, "They'll understand, Fola..
They'll forgive you.
It'll be all right.
They're your friends.
They can't do something
that horrible to you."

You twisted up his mind and now you're throwing him away. You made a slave of him in this stupid system and now you're SURPRISED when he rebels regardless of the consequences? You TOOK everything, he has nothing to lose! You have NO RIGHT!

He doesn't care about anything, anymore, do you think he WANTS to feel that way, you think ANYONE would want to be that way EVER? You think he doesn't want to be happy? You kicked him down and now you're punishing him for being on the ground!

Look at it this way, Miss Vivian.

Excuse me if I place no value whatsoever on what you have to say. Take her out.

You're just as much a product of this 'system' as Fola is.

You're a servant defending her master with no more insight than a programmed machine.

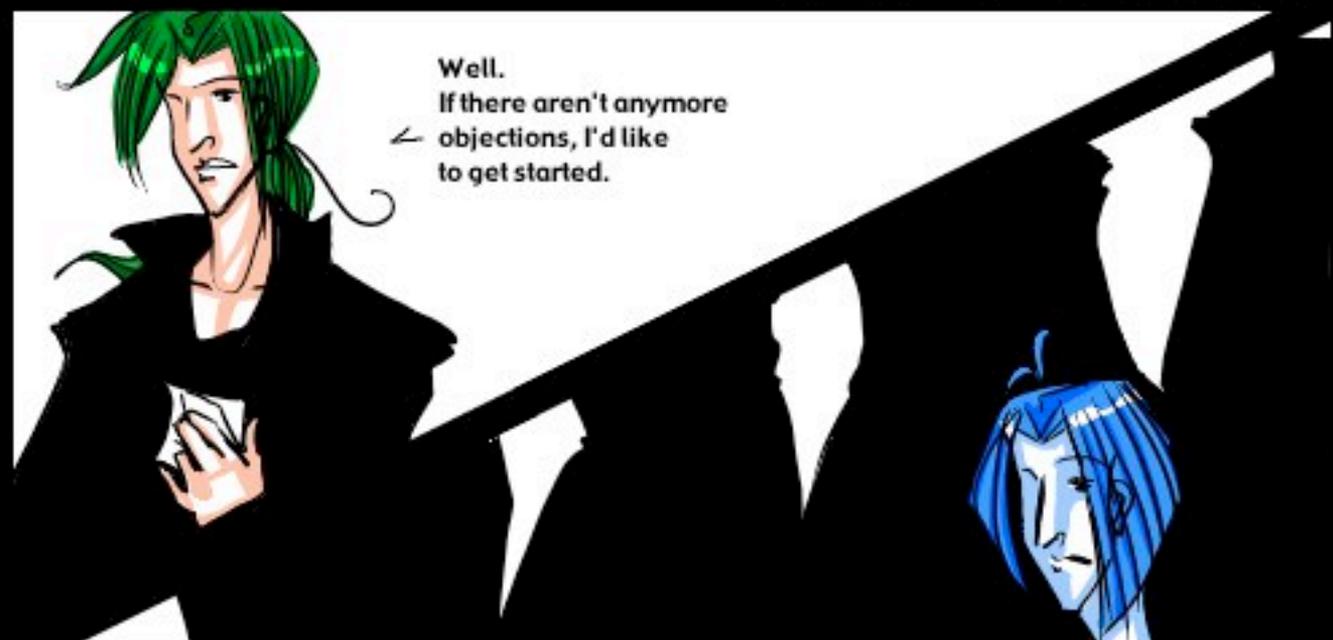
C'mon, you!

You don't know any better than we do, Lemanerial. This city looks to you for its morality. Someday they'll come to collect.

Whatever will you do, Lemanerial? And what will they do TO you? How long do you think you can hide it? How long before you finally run out of time?

Augh, FUCK! GET HER OUT OF HERE!

The girl is obviously beside herself. Take her to Annelcey's. Now.



Well.
If there aren't anymore
objections, I'd like
to get started.

four days later





Did you see Fola, then? →

No. No visitors. Apparently nobody's seen him but Lem.

.... I'm not surprised.

It's only been three days since we sent him there...he just appeared this morning in the same place. <

But...Cal, for him, five thousand years had passed. The lions keep you as long as you've lived, doubling your age. <

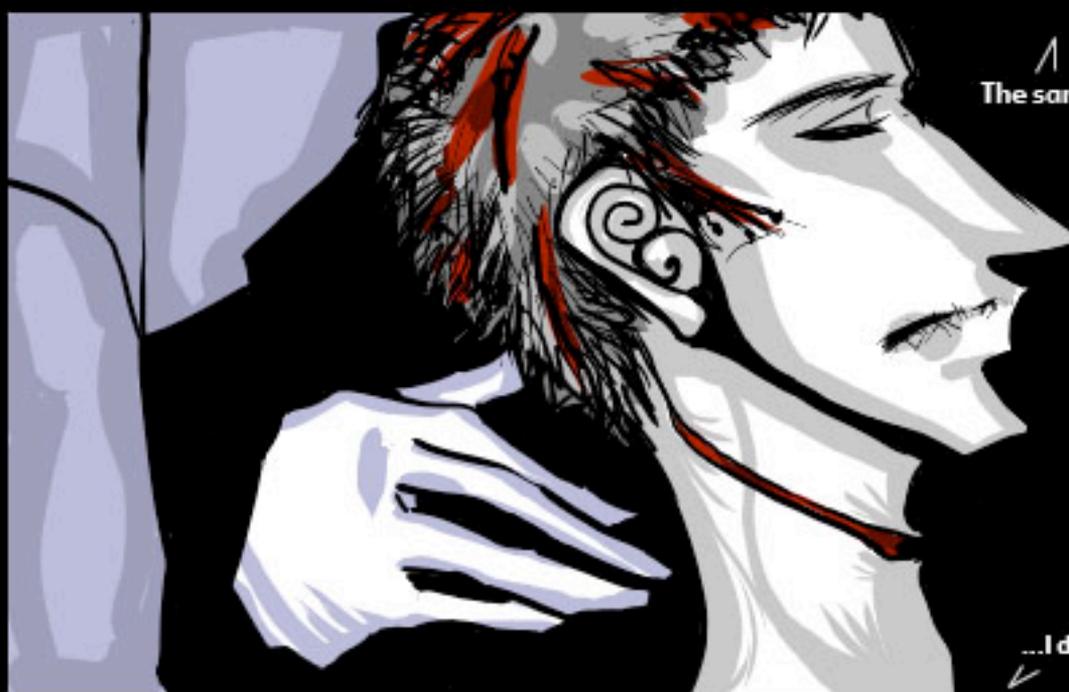
...How is Mid doing?



The same.

Why did he do it, Fern?

...I dunno...I...dunno.





Cal, he needs help.



You..
you're going
to take him
away?



We can't help him, Cal it'll....only be awhile....



*I failed him.
I failed him like I did Rae....
I failed them both.*

A-all...right...

I'll take him tomorrow.

Four weeks later at Annelcey's Mental Hospital for Minions

I've been waiting for a freaking HOUR. Don't they know who I am?

Hggghh.

Fuck it.

What sort of magazine is this?

A quiz that will tell me whether or not I am 'fulfilled.' People READ this stuff?

about time someone in this comic landed in a loony bin....

Reception

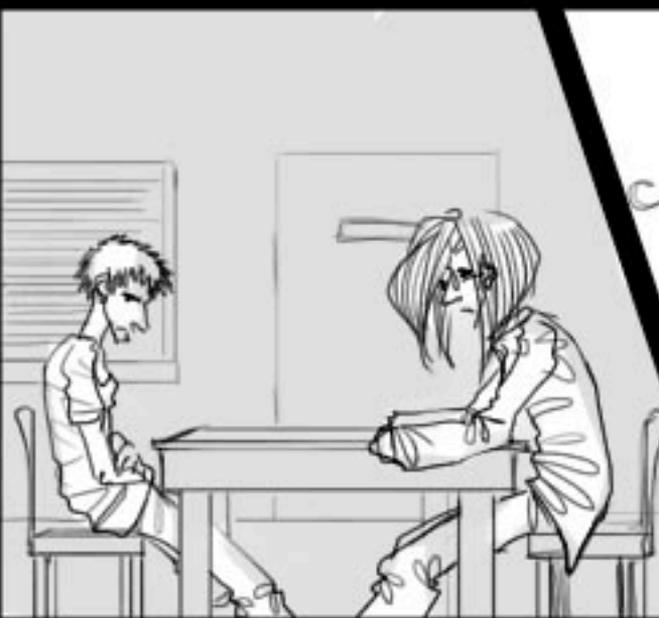
Well, admittedly, I've never tried that before...

I feel like I'm being watched.

Can I help you, kid?

No. I was just looking at you. You have a big head.

All right. Move along.



So. You're um.
Looking better.
How are you
feeling?

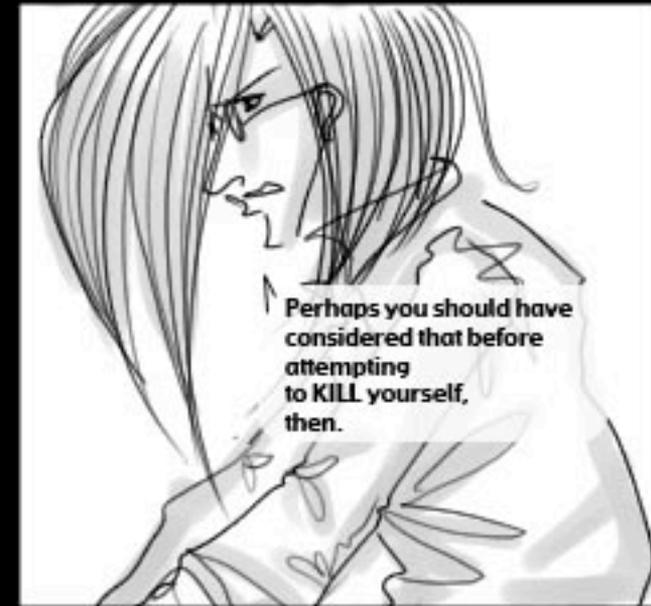


Why don't you
tell me?
You put me
in this
place,
after
all.

I get enough
platitudes
and funny
looks--from the
crazies, no less,
not to mention
the doctors.
I don't
need them
from you.



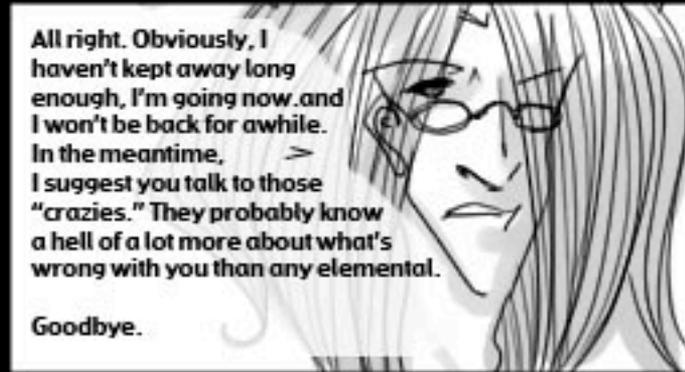
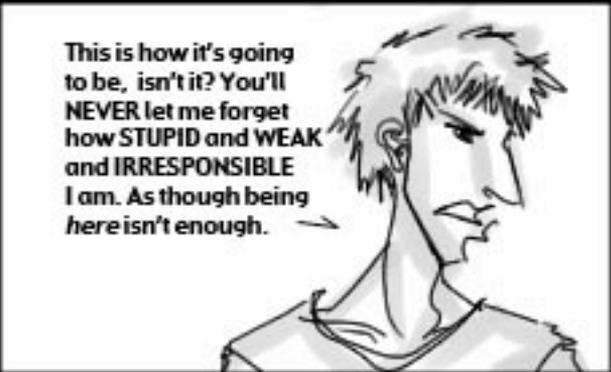
Perhaps you should have
considered that before
attempting
to KILL yourself,
then.



This is how it's going
to be, isn't it? You'll
NEVER let me forget
how STUPID and WEAK
and IRRESPONSIBLE
I am. As though being
here isn't enough.

All right. Obviously, I
haven't kept away long
enough, I'm going now and
I won't be back for awhile.
In the meantime,
I suggest you talk to those
"crazies." They probably know
a hell of a lot more about what's
wrong with you than any elemental.

Goodbye.



"think"



So began my first stay at Annelcey's mental hospital.

Annelcey's was a hospital built by and for minions. It is the only place in Faidia the primary elementals are forbidden to enter. Secondaries can visit, but only when permission is granted.

As you can probably guess, it was pretty difficult to set this place up. If it weren't for the vehement support of the secondaries, it would never have been built.

A mental hospital. Pretty pathetic excuse for recompense. But the elementals got to feel very generous.

It's a long, low building, white inside and out. From a distance, in the right light, you can see the magical shields around the place, like a bubble with several layers.

When I first came, it seemed very quiet to me... But then again, I wasn't really listening, either.

The worst thing was the boredom. There was nothing. They wouldn't let me have most of my things. I was monitored constantly. I don't know why. I couldn't die. They knew that.

Annelcey's is in the middle of northern tundra. There are no roads to it. You arrive by teleportation, or carmor. Some patients are terrified of magic. Once you get here, you don't go outside. I just look out the windows at the shifting snow.

I get...a lot of attention. They've never had a Callanerialian here before. Understandably. I can't picture Smoke here. I can't listen to them, or speak, not right now...

There are surprisingly few patients here. A lot of them come to die. I should have asked Fern about Fola... Funny.

Treat people like shit, and then act surprised when this kind of thing happens, like it was our job to be moral all along and not theirs.

GET WELL SOON



My head started to defog only after I'd been there around 3 months.



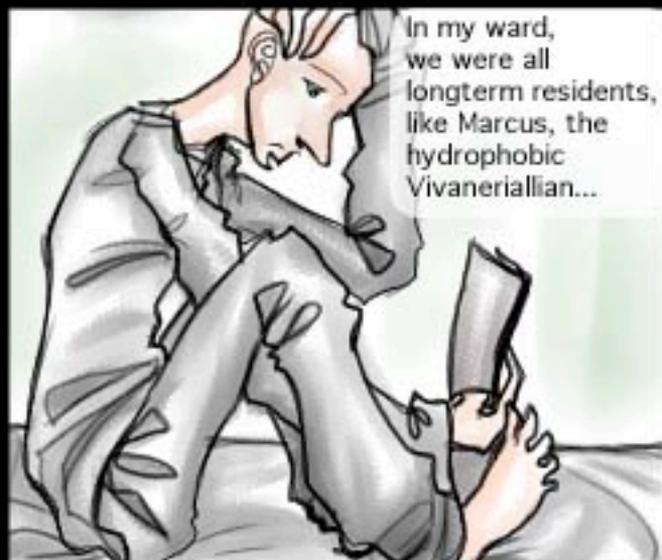
I had a lot of time to think ... and I realized there WERE things to do..

I just couldn't make myself interested in them.



I watched the other patients, for lack of anything else.

In my ward, we were all longterm residents, like Marcus, the hydrophobic Vivanerallian...



And Kieden, handsome, bored and snobbish. On occasion he'd condescend to flirt with someone he fancied.

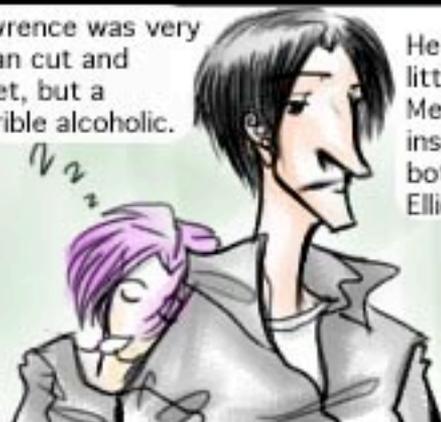


He was supposed to be dangerous, but he seemed more weirded out by the rest of us than anything..

Karenina, who'd been a librarian, would engage you in lively conversation and then threaten to cut you...

Lawrence was very clean cut and quiet, but a terrible alcoholic.

He and Fern's little 'friend,' Mew, were inseparable, both Ellionerallian.



There were a lot of other people, of course, coming and going, all the time, but I don't remember them as well.



Delye, though, was the most memorable of them all And that's putting it lightly.





I was minding my own business one day, reading on the corner couch in one of the quieter rooms... (minding your own business, of course, being one of the most dangerous things you can possibly do)



I'd heard a lot of RUMORS about Delye... He was a difficult patient, one of the MOST difficult...

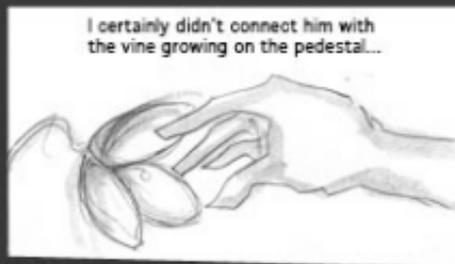


rustle

But I'd never actually seen him.



I certainly didn't connect him with the vine growing on the pedestal...



AAAAUGH!

POUNCE



poof

ACK! I'm sorry! You're an aksandri--



I really don't recommend this method of making friends, by the way.

It took an orderly to get him off me, and by that time--

HE FUCKING BIT MY NOSE!

I was, understandably, rather irritated.

Sit still, Midnight..

Don't boss me around after THIS--why didn't anyone TELL me, at least, I was given the impression this place was SAFE..

It turns out they kept Delye 'safe' by pumping him full of drugs ... If I hadn't been too busy pitying myself, I might have had the spare energy to pity him.

They told me Delye's doctor would have a 'talk' with me, but he was away in hospital himself for heart surgery And how spirit-lifting that was.

Even without elementals, life was troubling enough...

At last though, I met the doctor, a certain Malley. He wasn't exactly what I expected.

Hell o there! I'm Ner Malley!

Uh.. hi.

I apologize for being so late attending to your problem.

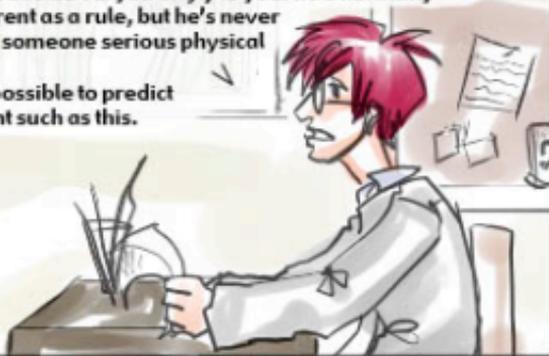
That's ok, my nose is nearly healed anyway...

Erm. Excuse me if this is rude, but I expected someone.. older for the doctor of THE most difficult patient in the hospital..

Understandable. But Delye's been through all of the other doctors... I'm fresh out of school and optimistic, I suppose. Please come to my office.



I regret that you were victim to some of Delye's most violent behavior yet..He's a very disturbed individual, and he reacted very strongly to you. He's normally belligerent as a rule, but he's never caused someone serious physical harm. It's impossible to predict an event such as this.



Right...Well, it's fine. It was only an accident, and my nose is fine now. No harm done. In fact, I think it helped me in a way. I knew since I arrived I didn't belong here, but this let me know I REALLY don't belong here. I'm hardly biting anyone's face off, am I?

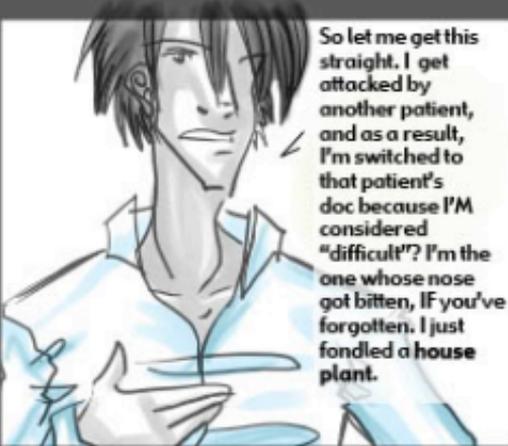
Er...It doesn't really work that way, Midnight. There are plenty of other patients--the majority, in fact--who are non violent. You're in a ward with patients who have committed violence against themselves or others. The rest of the patients at this hospital are non-violent. Many came here voluntarily. Violence is not the only standard for mental illness...just an unfortunate result for some. You're exactly where you should be.



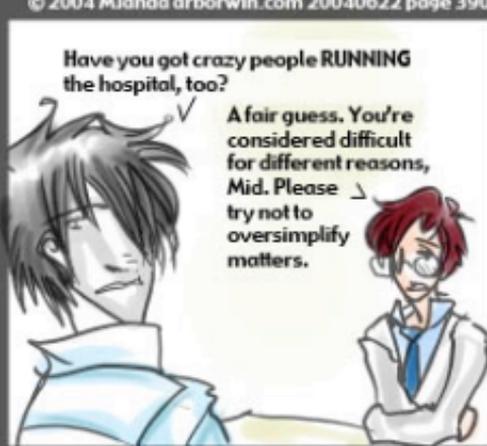
Listen, I'm not going to try and KILL myself again--and why are we having this conversation, anyway? You're not my doctor.

Er..As of today, actually, I am.



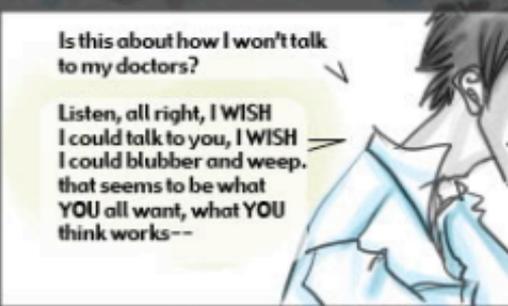


So let me get this straight. I get attacked by another patient, and as a result, I'm switched to that patient's doc because I'M considered "difficult"? I'm the one whose nose got bitten, IF you've forgotten. I just fondled a house plant.



Have you got crazy people **RUNNING** the hospital, too?

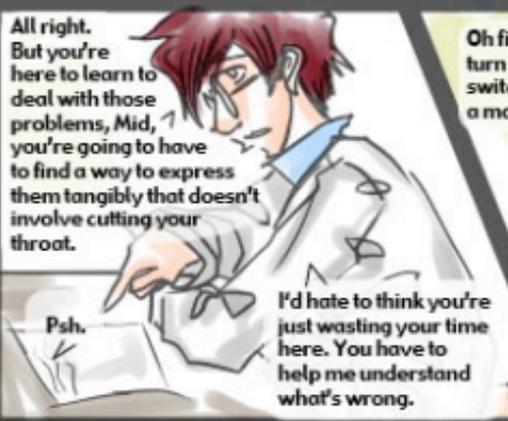
A fair guess. You're considered difficult for different reasons, Mid. Please try not to oversimplify matters.



Is this about how I won't talk to my doctors?

Listen, all right, I **WISH** I could talk to you, I **WISH** I could blubber and weep. that seems to be what **YOU** all want, what **YOU** think works--

I bet it works just **FINE** for those patients of yours who enjoy spilling their guts to complete and utter strangers contriving to be their best friend, but I'm sorry, it makes me *uncomfortable*. Am I the **ONLY** patient who doesn't care for this? Seems unlikely to me. I **CANT. DO IT.** Period. My problems are not-- topics for conversation, all right?



All right. But you're here to learn to deal with those problems, Mid, you're going to have to find a way to express them tangibly that doesn't involve cutting your throat.

Psh.

I'd hate to think you're just wasting your time here. You have to help me understand what's wrong.

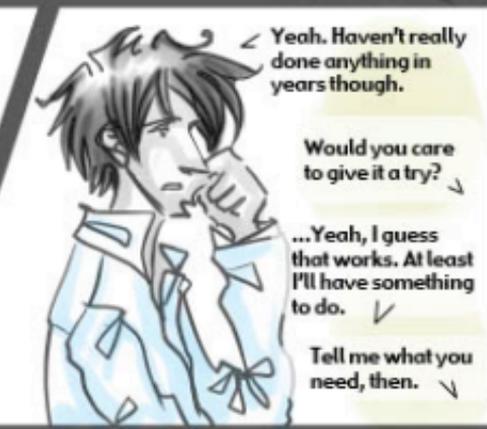


Oh fine, I'll just turn on my "talking" switch then, I AM a machine, after all.

Why don't you try to get me to draw with my left hand while you're at it? Just as long as you don't expect a masterpiece or **ANY** kind of progress...



Er, well, there are plenty of other ways to exchange ideas-- **DO** you draw?

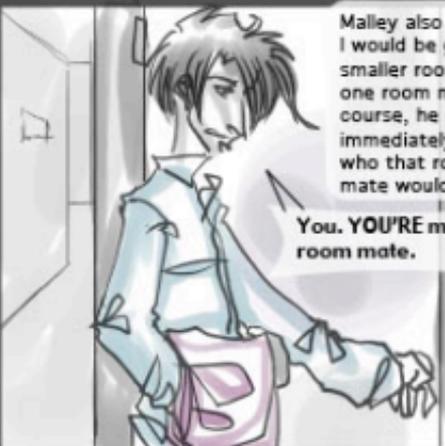


Yeah. Haven't really done anything in years though.

Would you care to give it a try?

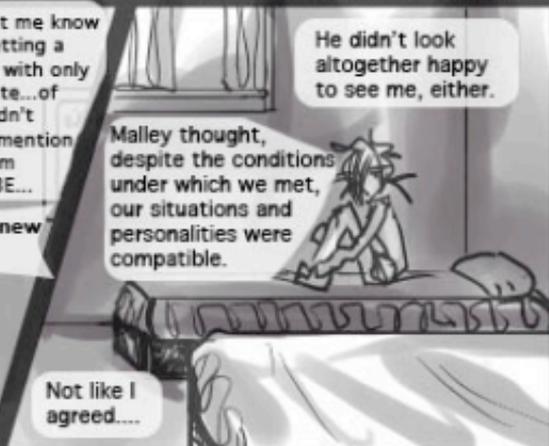
...Yeah, I guess that works. At least I'll have something to do.

Tell me what you need, then.



Malley also let me know I would be getting a smaller room with only one room mate...of course, he didn't immediately mention who that room mate would BE...

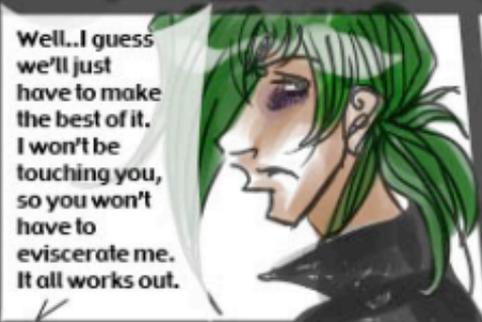
You. YOU'RE my new room mate.



He didn't look altogether happy to see me, either.

Malley thought, despite the conditions under which we met, our situations and personalities were compatible.

Not like I agreed....



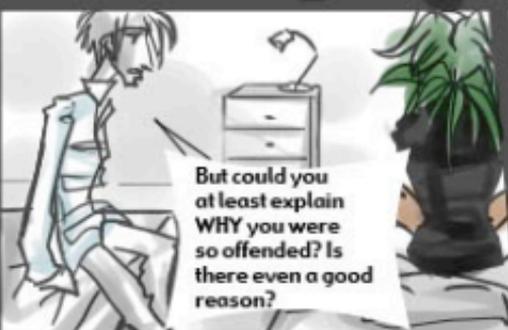
Well..I guess we'll just have to make the best of it. I won't be touching you, so you won't have to eviscerate me. It all works out.



Not gonna talk, huh?

Fine with me.

flop

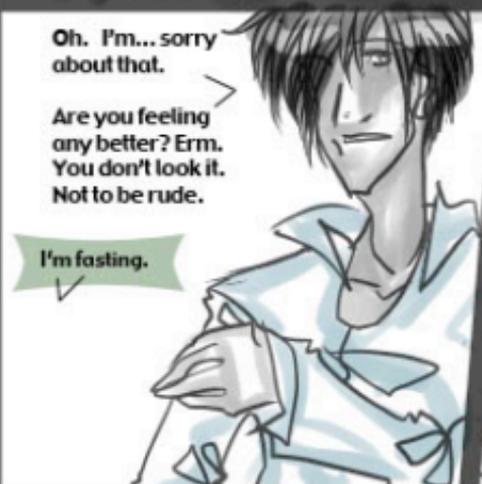


But could you at least explain WHY you were so offended? Is there even a good reason?



My blooms were in a very sensitive state. I only bloom once a year. You would have ruined them.

They were ruined anyway because I had to shift.



Oh. I'm... sorry about that.

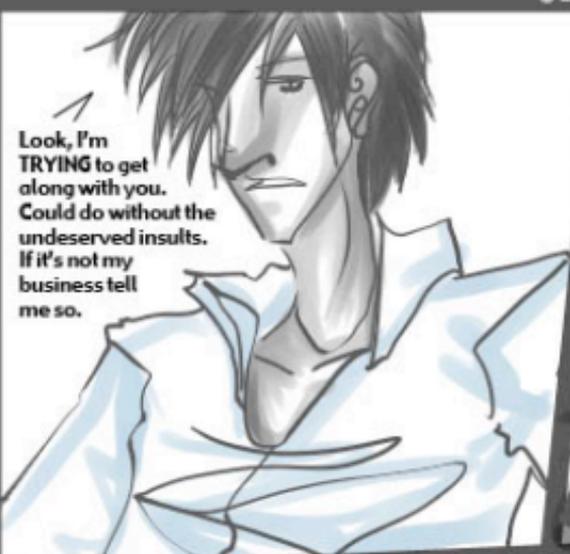
Are you feeling any better? Erm. You don't look it. Not to be rude.

I'm fasting.



....What for?

So they can't medicate me, stupid. Did you grow up in a shoe box?

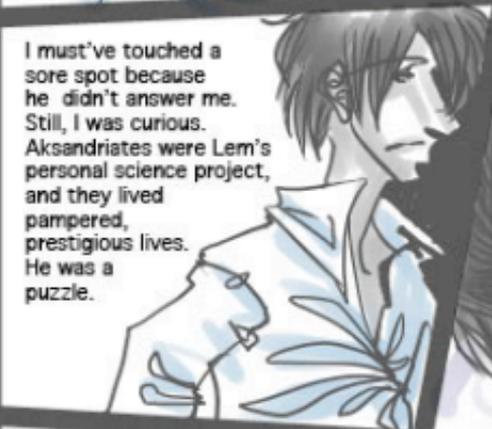


Look, I'm TRYING to get along with you. Could do without the undeserved insults. If it's not my business tell me so.



Anyway, you shouldn't talk. I know what you are--an aksandriate. Your kind lives the most sheltered life out of any race on Faidia.

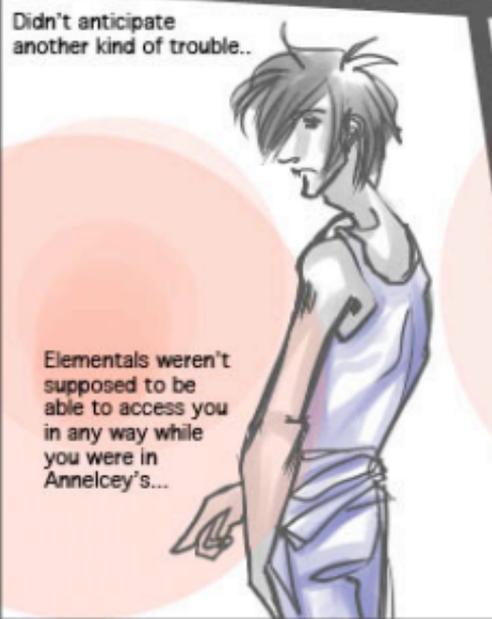
Can't imagine what brought you here-- You're not supposed to be let out of Tower.



I must've touched a sore spot because he didn't answer me. Still, I was curious. Aksandriates were Lem's personal science project, and they lived pampered, prestigious lives. He was a puzzle.



So I went to bed that first night in my new room hoping I wouldn't get my face bitten off during the night...



Didn't anticipate another kind of trouble..

Elementals weren't supposed to be able to access you in any way while you were in Annelcey's...



But Rae controlled dreams, and they didn't really take him into account warding the place...

Plus I think part of me really did want to see him.... S'never good when your own mind works against you.



[Let's have romantic, desperate things to say to each other] [and not say them]

[Never thought my hair would be shorter than yours]

[Must not have been thinking when you did it then] [No, I wasn't!] [That was the point]



[Don't have to scream a lot to predict monsoons]

[Don't paint my content black--]



[Stop reminding me then]

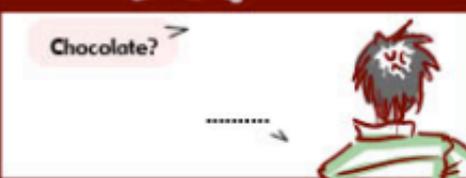
[.....]



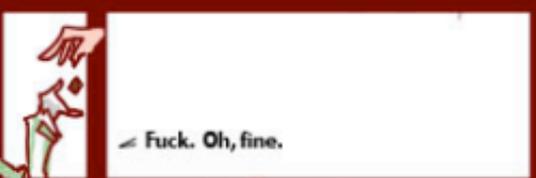
All right, all RIGHT!



Your CONCERN is understood.



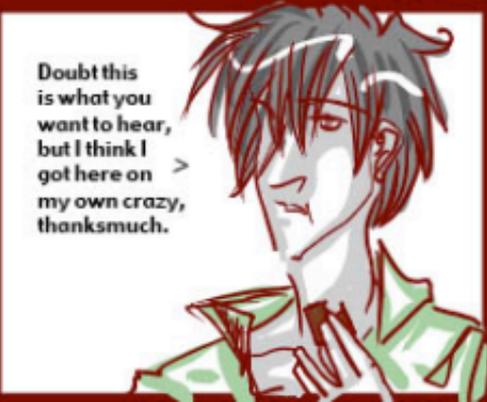
Chocolate?



← Fuck. Oh, fine.



Cal drove you to this. >



Doubt this is what you want to hear, but I think I got here on my own crazy, thanksmuch.

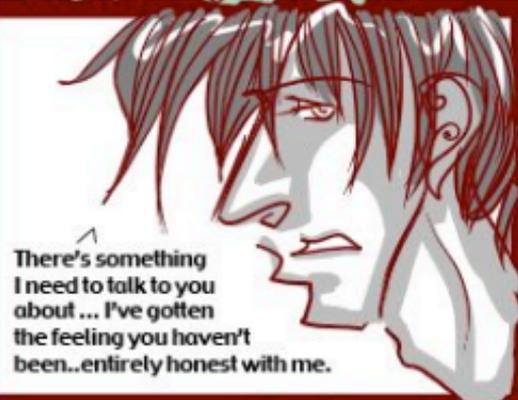




I know it's in your nature to be nonsensical, but I'd also appreciate it if we just ... kept it to rational conversation tonight.

... If that's even possible. Something close to it, anyway. Something unlike a delusion? Realistic prose?

Mmmm.



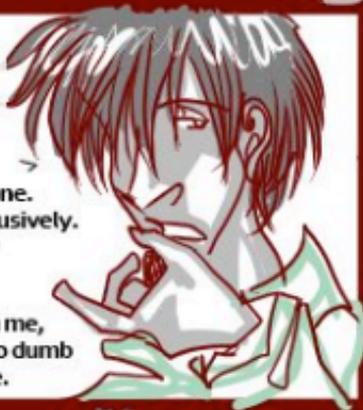
There's something I need to talk to you about ... I've gotten the feeling you haven't been...entirely honest with me.

I don't know what would give you that impression.

You're nervous ... and strained all the time. Orchestrated...we've never had a real conversation...not like friends.



And...well, I'd like to be your friend. But I'd also like some honesty... from everyone. Not you exclusively. It seems like everyone's keeping secrets from me, but I'm not so dumb I don't notice.



It's insulting to twist my perceptions around for me. You're not doing me any favors.



Psh, reality.

We're elementals! We **CONSTRUCT** reality, WE decide what's what. Whatever I do IS reality.

No..no it's not.

Not to me. Ironically enough, not even to you.



I remember something Fern said, when he and the other secondaries were fighting for this hospital I'm in now...

Once you create other minds, Rae, other conscious entities, of any kind, you can't simply change important things and preserve those minds at the same time. Either you grant us free will or not.



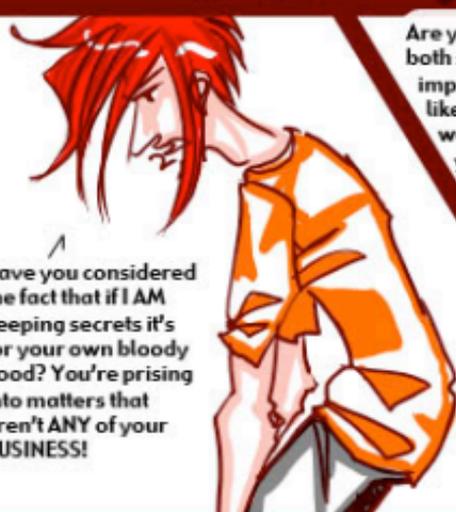
What has this got to do with free will? ↘



...Everything, Rae. You... all of you primaries.. you don't understand what you've created. You think giving us our own minds will be just a stroll in the park ... You made us **EQUAL** to you in the most fundamental and powerful of ways.



↖ With free will came objectivity. We can **QUESTION** you, if you change reality, we **CALL** you on it. But you like the part where I **CHOOSE** to care about you, don't you? But not enough, I suppose, to make it worth the sacrifice of control? You cannot possess omnipotence and be loved, Rae. You either have one or the other.

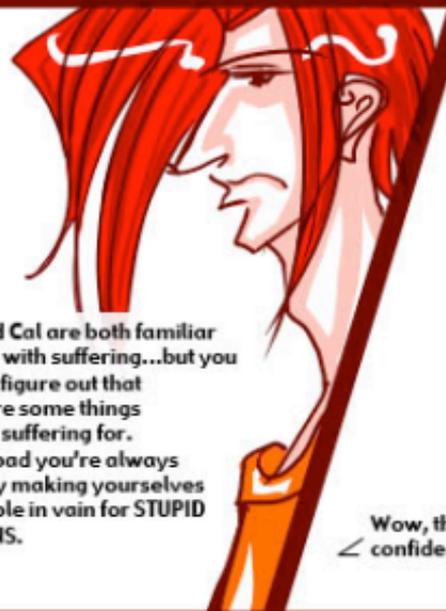


↖ Have you considered the fact that if I **AM** keeping secrets it's for your own bloody good? You're prising into matters that aren't **ANY** of your **BUSINESS!**

Are you and Cal daft?! You both seem to be under the impression that treating me like an **INFANT** is the correct way to handle me! I want your **RESPECT**, your **TRUST** not your fucking condescension! And **DON'T** ramble at me about your **SACRED** and **MYSTERIOUS** past -- Your secrets are as profane as anyone else's!



↖ You don't know--
No, I **DON'T**, but how about you give me a chance to judge for myself before making all my decisions for me?



↖ You and Cal are both familiar enough with suffering...but you have to figure out that there are some things **WORTH** suffering for. It's too bad you're always too busy making yourselves miserable in vain for **STUPID REASONS.**

....All right. I'll show you. You won't understand until you know.

↖ Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence.

Ooh shut up.. ↘



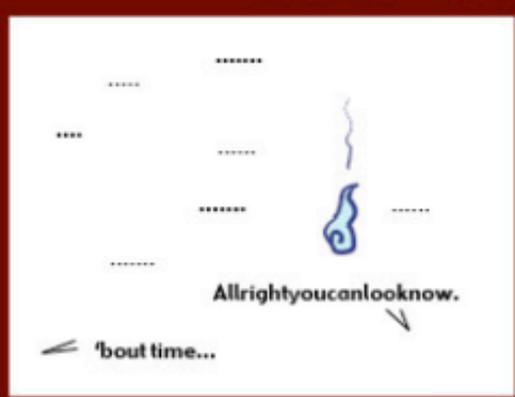
Turn around.

Turn around ...?
Rae. Is this
about crossdressing?
Because I'm
all right with that,
you know--

...No, that is
..not it..
Just turn
around,
would you?!



hums



Allrightyoucanlooknow.

'bout time...



.....



....Rae..

Look up.

You're.. a halfling.



Mmm hm.



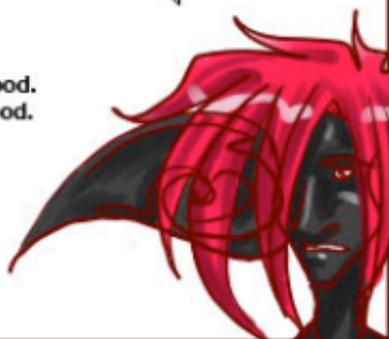
Okay.. Uhm... Do you.. have any.. problems? You know... physically?

That I should know about?



..... I had flat feet when I was little. Cal fixed them. Otherwise, no.

Okay..good. That's good.



Well..... This is awkward. As halflings go, he really doesn't look that bad...

He's symmetrical, no extra limbs, and he's just as handsome, aside from..the ears...



But he's going to jump over every word out of my mouth... How can I be sincere in a way he can't ignore?

If he weren't so serious, it'd be hilarious....



Well.. It really does suit you, Rae.

A lot of things... make sense to me now.

What do you mean? Like what?

Uh..Sometimes you make this purring sound--

Oh.



Rae, it's not the end of the world...
 I'm not saying it IS, but how would you like it, being stuck like this?! All the rest of you can attain perfect form, and here I have to put up with being perpetually..this, I can't even pull off a proper species in an ILLUSION because I PURR...

Who put these ideas into your head? Was it Cal?
 No...Cal's always liked the way I look...

Then where?!

LOOK, I'm NOT an idiot, I KNOW what mortals think because of what Lem TOLD them. Just because CAL can stand me doesn't make it acceptable -- look at the OTHER things he likes...

Rae, if anyone believes that "perfect form" crap, they're IDIOTS and you don't want to know them anyway.
 shrug You gave me a chance, & you know what? I'm not one of them.

Lem HIMSELF has got to know it's a load of poppycock...People hear 'survival of the fittest' and assume that means that anything alive is therefore perfect. But life is rife with mistakes, flaws, imperfections. There is no such THING as perfect form, even people who breed NECCOS for a hobby know that their standards are essentially make-believe.
 It's hardly a basis for one's self-esteem.



So what you're saying is... I'm not ugly, but I'm stupid for listening to them?

Actually, yes.
 siiigh



Seriously, Rae,
it's not that bad...



But I guess you're
not going to believe
me anytime soon.

Are you?



..... Are you covered in fuzz?



Fur--
Can I touch???

Seeing
as you are
already...

You're so soft...

Um...yeah...



All right, Rae...

I know you're
uncomfortable
about this, still. I've
told you what I
think..so you
should go now,
and think about
it, all right?



You want
me to leave?!

I'm not rejecting
you. When you're
ready NOT to be
rejected, you can
come back. How
about that?

....Oh.

I'll see
you soon.

Well I would say that was a successful mission ... even if it did take 2 years to get those bloody villagers to leave their VOLCANIC, LAVA-EXUDING Island...

All's well that ends well. Now we can lie around, drink, and eat milanos.



At home.

We've been gone for two years.

Oh...yeah, lazing proceeds making the house liveable again. That goes without saying. I hate always coming home to a neglected house...



...Oy. Waitasec. It's clean. And somebody's opened a window.... and turned on lights!

There's a stranger here.

sniff sniff



...Hello? Cal, are you up?



Hello--I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in.



YOU'RE NOT CAL!

I SAID there was a stranger...





You must be Fern.

That's right...

It's good to meet you at last. Cal has told me so much about you.

Oh. Uh.. That's nice. Where IS Cal, anyway?

I think he's attending to some elemental business. He asked me to wait here.



I see. And you are...?

Asne. I suppose it's no surprise he hasn't mentioned me to you...

Er..I've been gone awhile.



He has told you who he is, hasn't he ...?

Oh yes. He didn't tell me when we first met, but it didn't take long for me to figure it out.

We're not easy to miss...

Heh.. No.



Wait...? You're one of the free people, aren't you?



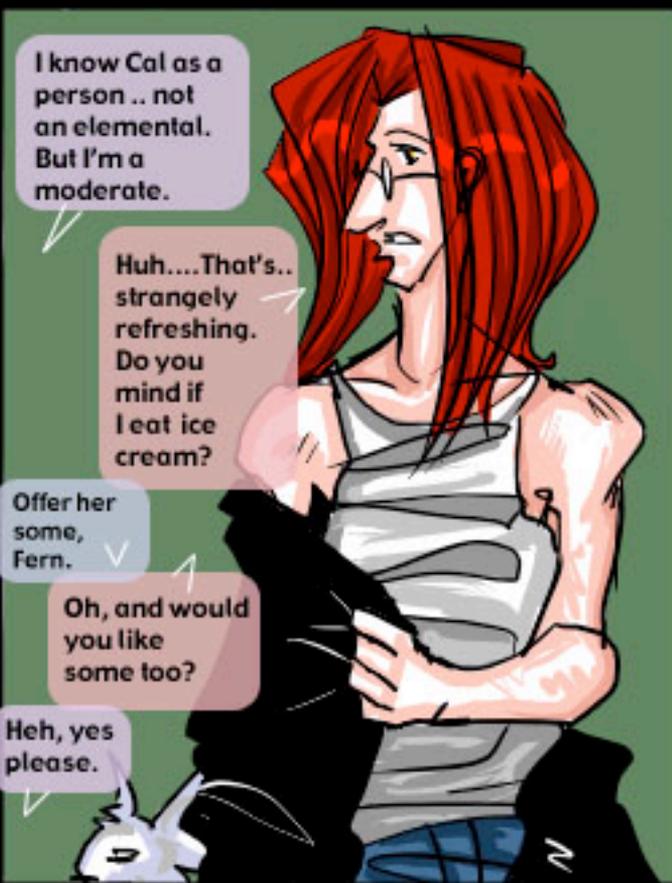
Yes! Cal knew that right away, too... How do you tell?

If you're aligned to an elemental, you have a certain... Aura, I suppose. A spark.



Free people lack that. It's..rather odd, actually, to see someone without one.

Anyway, I thought you people weren't s'posed to BELIEVE in elementals.



I know Cal as a person .. not an elemental. But I'm a moderate.

Huh....That's..strangely refreshing. Do you mind if I eat ice cream?

Offer her some, Fern.

Oh, and would you like some too?

Heh, yes please.



Oh, we know you exist. Obviously, you exist. The free people just don't believe elemental/mortal interaction is necessary or safe.

Seeing as how you're Cal's friend, you don't share that view?

That was the first time I met Asne...we talked for several hours--about Faidian politics, mostly. It would turn out to be the first of many other nights like it.

(Cal makes people wait for him all the time :P)

Understandably, I was a bit flummoxed at first by the whole thing.

A girlfriend! CAL HAS A GIRLFRIEND! Why don't I have a girlfriend?!

It might have to do with how you tell anyone who flirts with you to perform unspeakable acts on themselves.

But, as unbelievable as it might seem, we had bigger fish to fry at the time.

Faidia had fallen into a world-wide drought. Forests were giving way to wasteland. Viv, Fola, and I were stuck out on the field most of the time, with occasional input from Ell and Funa, who stayed at Tower with the computers.

Fola was well enough to work, but he was fairly unpleasant to look at ... They were trying to salvage his damaged eye, but it looked like a lost cause.

We didn't ask, he didn't tell.

Anyway.. you can tell a lot, without words.

When he came back, what was left of his hair had been turned stark white.

No one knew why the weather was screwed up ... Fola, Viv and I all had a hand in the weather--precipitation, temperature, and so forth. All of our elements merged in the weather. It's impossible to trace a problem back to a single source with such a complicated, mercurial system. Playing detective or shrink, you might see Fola, looking like something the cat dragged in and dragged back out again... And Viv, he'd never smile when he was by himself, and you could practically smell the anger, like brine, on his breath. And then of course, me.

The years tottered by, and things started looking up. The drought ended....

We worked, though. Always, we worked. We got along okay when it was just us.

There was no way we could have known what happened next.

It started while I was still out working with Viv and Fola...

A forest far south of Tower

Ah, I just love the great outdoors. I can remember when this forest wasn't here..What? Don't you think it's marvelous?

If I didn't know how much work went into it, and if I hadn't burned down fifty others like it in the past ten years, maybe.

They weren't like this one, they were dead. Mostly.

YOU'RE going to be mostly dead if one more guest arrives.

I didn't ask them here...!

And I suppose you don't drink out of the pickle jar, either. Tell them to beat it. We're camped for the night, not throwing a party.

Don't be rude, Fern.. They came to help ...

They CAME to get in the way!

But MELCEYS, Fern! They're such agreeable company, and so entertaining.

You're..a little bit special, Viv. They. Are. MELCEYS. If anyone is going to be entertained, it's them.

So, we'll give them a bedtime story. Your storytelling abilities are renowned far and wide, Fern.



Stories later.
Scuttlebutt now.

What's this I hear about the halfling facilities?

On that account, Fola would be the little bird to ask. But what about from your quarter?



What ABOUT my quarter?



C'mon, you can't have missed all the rumors about ... the woman. The free woman?

Oh, Asne. Those rumors are nothing new; none of them are true, of course. The truth is never as exciting as your typical Tower gossip.



I hear she's a political upstart.

If you mean she has her own opinions, yeah, she is.



I intend no harm, I just think certain events of late are ... well, I wanted your opinion.



Is she aware of how much danger she's put herself in, consorting with Cal?

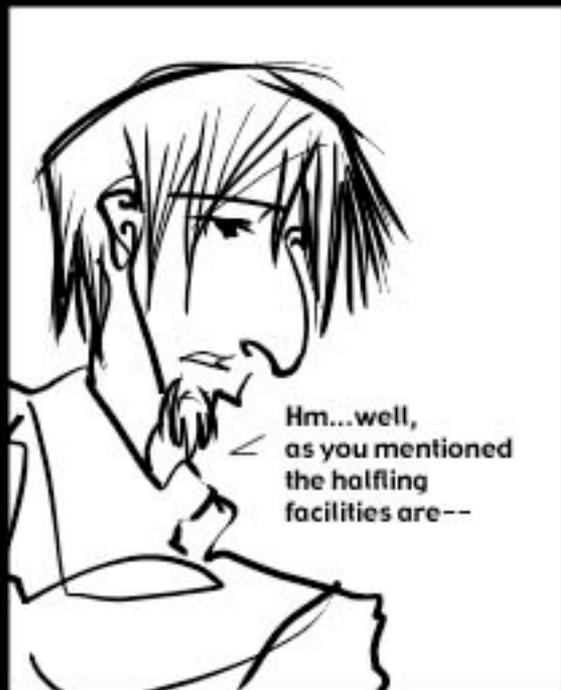
If I've told her once, I've told her a thousand times.

But ... well, starcrossed, and all that ...

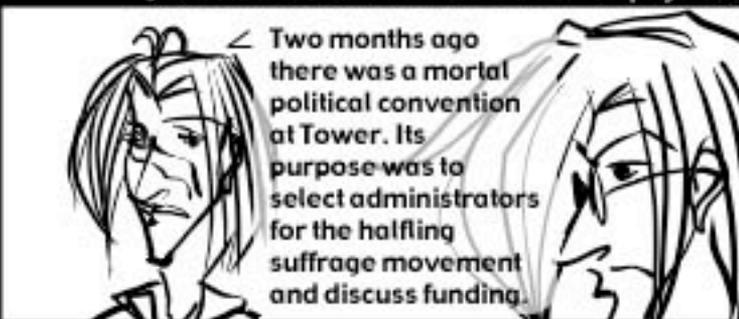


--Hey, what do you mean, 'certain events'? Do you know something I don't?

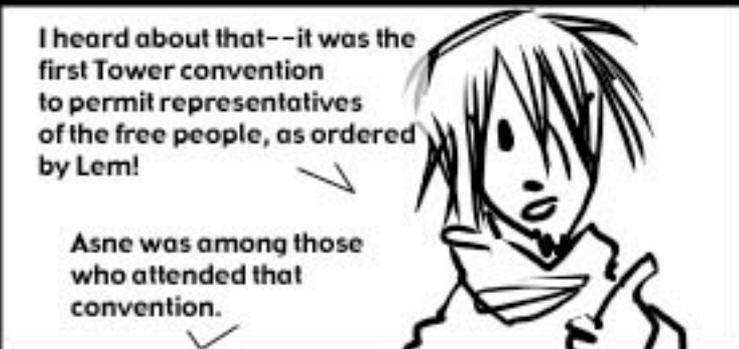




Hm...well, as you mentioned the halfling facilities are--



Two months ago there was a mortal political convention at Tower. Its purpose was to select administrators for the halfling suffrage movement and discuss funding.



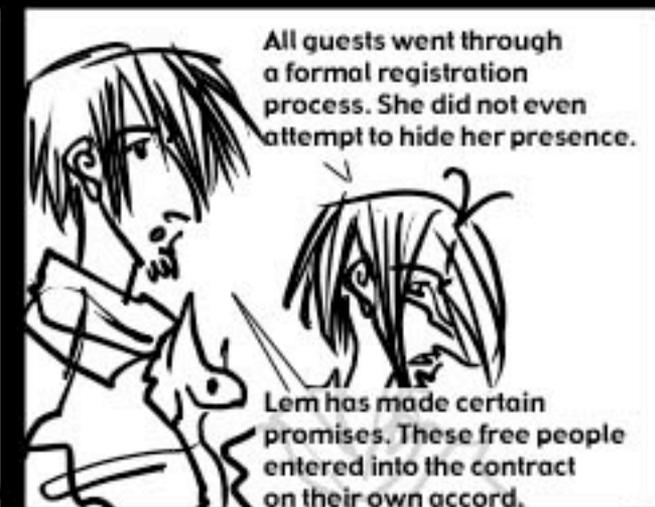
I heard about that--it was the first Tower convention to permit representatives of the free people, as ordered by Lem!

Asne was among those who attended that convention.



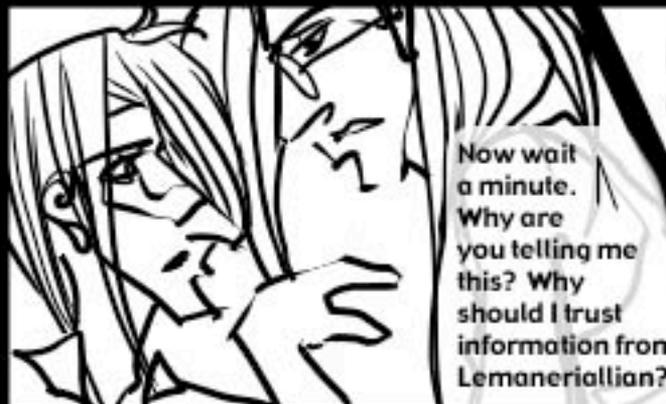
No, Fola, that isn't possible. Asne can't have gone-- mortals who enter Tower are automatically, magically bound to Tower law. She knows that, no free person would set FOOT in Tower!

Nevertheless, she did.

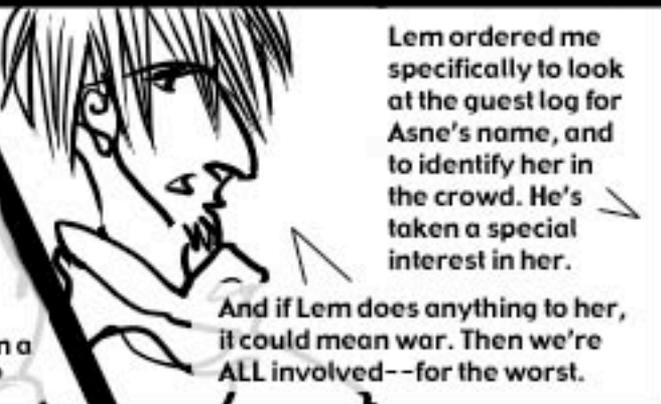


All guests went through a formal registration process. She did not even attempt to hide her presence.

Lem has made certain promises. These free people entered into the contract on their own accord.

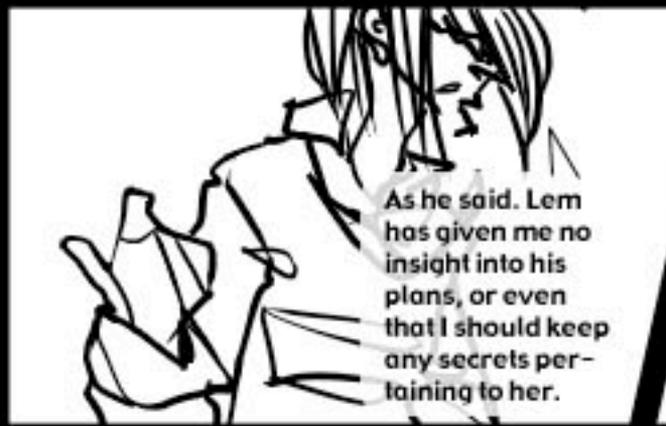


Now wait a minute. Why are you telling me this? Why should I trust information from a Lemaneriallian?

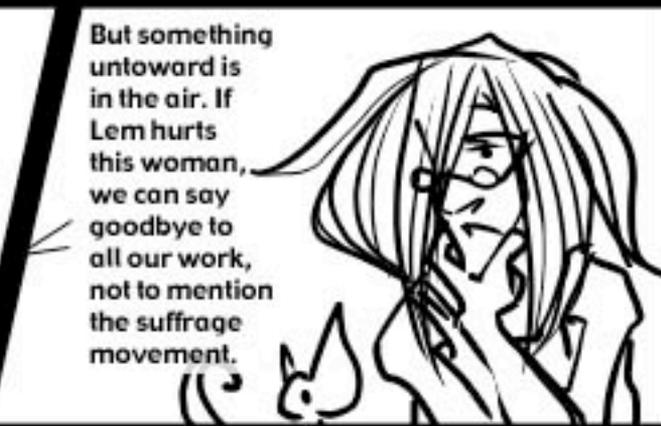


Lem ordered me specifically to look at the guest log for Asne's name, and to identify her in the crowd. He's taken a special interest in her.

And if Lem does anything to her, it could mean war. Then we're ALL involved--for the worst.



As he said. Lem has given me no insight into his plans, or even that I should keep any secrets pertaining to her.



But something untoward is in the air. If Lem hurts this woman, we can say goodbye to all our work, not to mention the suffrage movement.

At Annelcey's...

Hmm..

Is that a letter from ... Fern?

Is he coming to visit?

Why are you fond of him? He calls you a lunatic.. among other things.

shrup

I don't mind I AM a lunatic.

He has such pretty eyes, and his hair looks like a flower.. a flower with fresh, newly opened pistils

His ...pistils ... right. Well, it's your lucky day. He writes he's coming tomorrow.

I could munch on it all day long...

But my letter to Fola came back again..

Why do you write that guy? He's the reason you're here!

Being Being Being Being

Fern says he's with him, so maybe he hasn't answered cause he's busy...

...You don't know how true that is ... My mom..My biological mother, Ell, told me if it wasn't for Fola, Lem would have had me killed.. He reasoned with him, so that instead Ell left me as a foal on a farm..

He did it for Ell.. A lot of things changed since...

If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't exist.. but ...

He was like your dad huh??

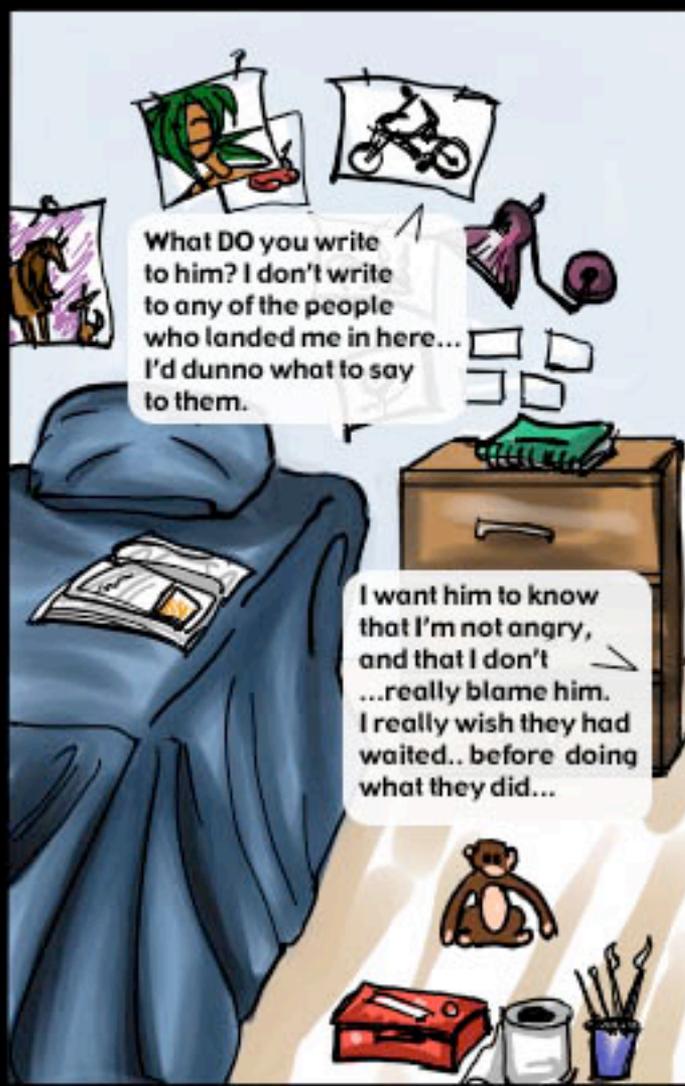
My biological dad was a horse. I lived with him a little while, but I don't remember it ...

I doubt you'd understand any of this stuff.. I guess Fola's the closest thing to a father I have.. but it's ..weird...

Hello. I am but a dog shadow puppet. But even I know that an aksandriate has a rhizome for a parent.

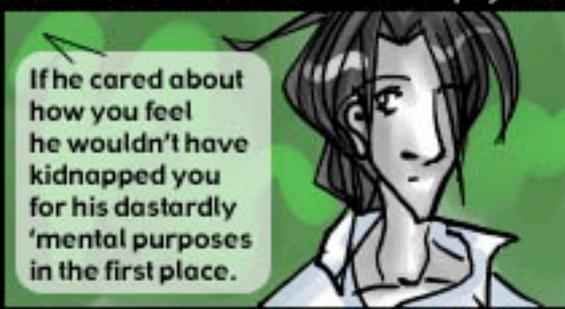
So don't talk to an akky about absentee parental units.

Could do without the sarcasm.



What DO you write to him? I don't write to any of the people who landed me in here... I'd dunno what to say to them.

I want him to know that I'm not angry, and that I don't ...really blame him. I really wish they had waited.. before doing what they did...



If he cared about how you feel he wouldn't have kidnapped you for his dastardly 'mental purposes in the first place.

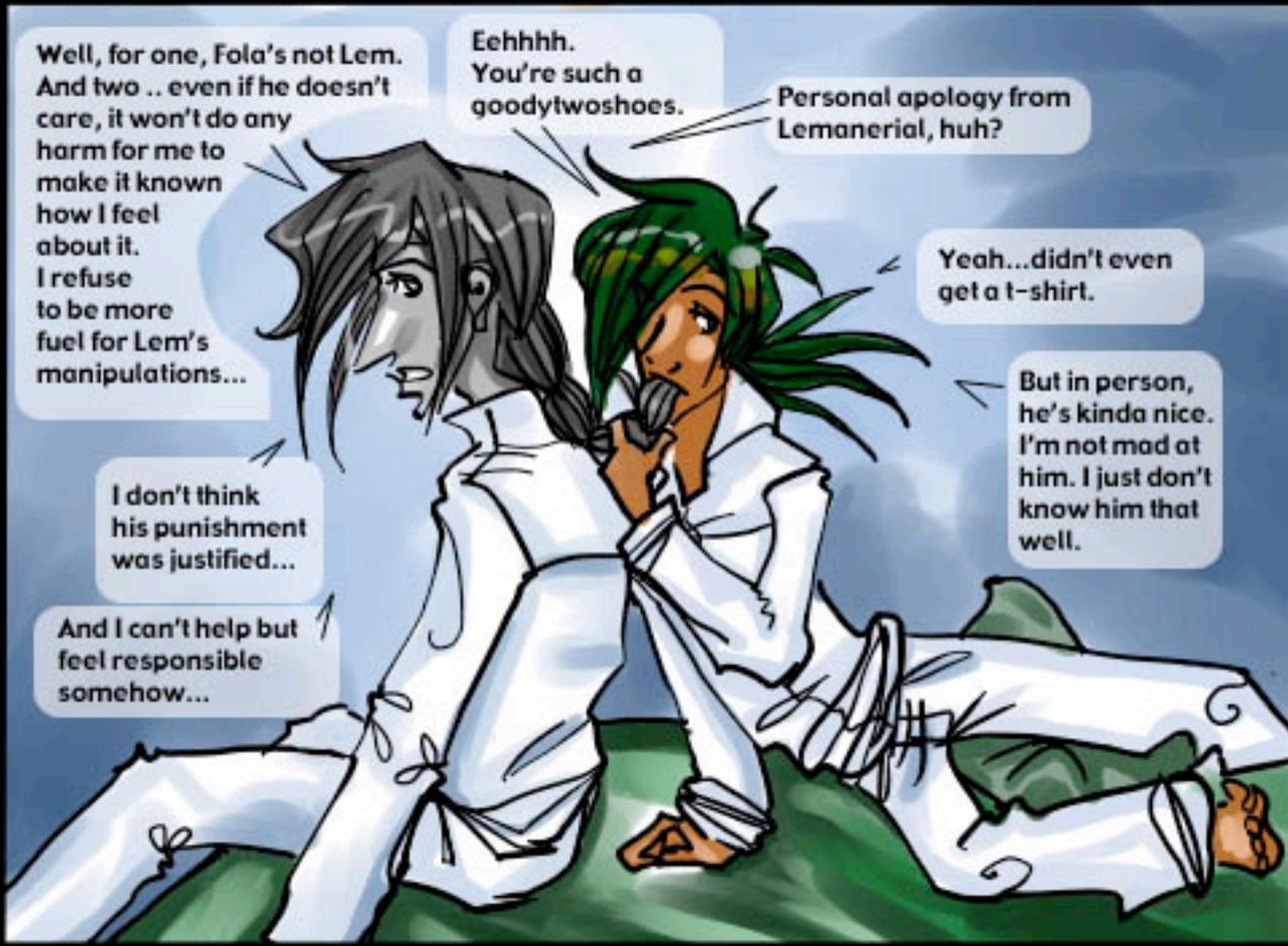


I received a personal apology from Lemanerial for what the space program did, and look where it got me.

This is different...



How?



Well, for one, Fola's not Lem. And two .. even if he doesn't care, it won't do any harm for me to make it known how I feel about it. I refuse to be more fuel for Lem's manipulations...

Eehhhh. You're such a goodytwo shoes.

Personal apology from Lemanerial, huh?

Yeah...didn't even get a t-shirt.

But in person, he's kinda nice. I'm not mad at him. I just don't know him that well.

I don't think his punishment was justified...

And I can't help but feel responsible somehow...

That same night,
around 2 am

click click
wriggle



Oh open up
you son of a
bitching door...

Ah--there.

These locks need
to be changed...



Though I guess I should
be grateful they weren't
changed in my
absence...



Mmm.

clunk



Well?
Aren't
you going
to drink it?

And any
others that
you can
find?

Haven't I told
you it's rude
to sneak up
on people?

Oh wait,
you GET OFF
on being
obnoxious.
I suppose that
doesn't apply
to you, then.
Silly me.



Look, Cal. Believe it or not, I'm not here to quarrel with you. OR drink.

I had some spare time, so I thought I'd rest until morning.



...You're not staying?

...No. Just passing through. I have too much to do still, I can't be settling at home. Smoke's with Viv and Fola, taking up my slack ... The weather's stabilized, by the way.

Glad to hear it.



Have you heard from Asne?

....Why? I thought she was with you?



No. I've been looking for her.

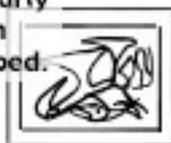
You know something about it.



I don't know anything. I'm in the dark.



I gotta visit Mid early tomorrow, so I'm just gonna go to bed.



Don't you dare turn your back on me while I'm speaking to you.



You're a terrible liar, Fern. I don't NEED to access your thoughts. I don't know why you still bother trying.



It's not a bother. It's instinct. I can't tell you--I don't know enough yet.



Are you plotting against her? Is that why she ran away?

Asne ran away?!

I haven't seen her for months. I've checked her home, her relatives.... nothing.



She's not --



NO! She's not! I'm asking the questions here!

All right, fine. I was ... informed.



No more nonsense, what do you know that I don't?

... That Asne entered Tower. Three months ago.

... I knew there was something strange about her...



What does it mean?



What do you care?

She's my friend!

So you've seen her since then?



Oh, WELL. Seeing as how your only source of social interaction stems from the pity your replacements have for you, then your concern is understandable.

...Cal...you --

Whatever. What the fuck ever.

I'm guessing, in your twisted estimation, I deserve that. Maybe you're right. Why not? What does matter, when you'll say about any stupid goddamn thing in the world just to make yourself feel better?





I get it, Cal. I **COMPREHEND** your opinion, okay? You think I **ENJOY** staying where I'm unwanted? I would've left a long, long, **LONG** time ago, but I **CAN'T**. I **CAN'T**. And I can't change that.



....You would have left me?



...How can you say that like it's a fucking **SURPRISE**?!>

Another **LIFE LESSON** for Callanerial-- when you **EXPRESS INTENSE DISLIKE** for a lover, what normally follows is **SEPARATION**.

I don't mind listening to your bullshit insults. What I hate are your thoughts.



When you look at me--all you think of are the--*things* you've done to me.

I can't forget those things with you **obsessing** about them.

I'm some blotto claustrophobe to you. A series of fuckups. Not Fern.

But...

I'm not about to *plot* anything.

It's over with.

Not like we had a chance.





But Fern..
Don't lie like that.
Lie? About what?
You wouldn't leave me, even if you could...
Aaaaaand why would that be?



You still like me.
I know you do. >
You wouldn't leave.



< ...Huh.
Once again, in your supreme ignorance of mortal convention, you still manage to make some kind of twisted sense ...



Well, enough of this shit.
I can't imagine going to bed now.
I'll go out and help you look for Asne until morning.

All right



< If you find her, bring her back here, call me, and stay with her until I return.



Yeah, yeah. I get it.

You might wonder how I could manually find someone in one night when I had the entire planet to search in.

Few of the other 'mentals had to track non-branch members, but I'd figured it out..

Even Cal did it the long way. So I had a little advantage.

In any of the major cities, if you knew which alley to look down, you could find urchins who knew more about society people than they knew about themselves.



They observed and listened to adults. To live, they had to. Between Kurhe, Asize, and Tower, I could organize dozens of kids within hours.

And bought for a song.

Rumor has a magic of its own. Results were fast.



That's how I found Asne.

Living in something of a hole in one of Tower's lower districts, its nearest equivalent to slums.

I've gotten to be leery of hiding places like these ...

Gee, wonder why.

Asne ...?

All right. You found me. Please. Get it over with.





Get ... what over with?
What's wrong? You
look like you've
seen a ghost--

Don't--p-please just
don't talk--



Asne. stop, take a breath and tell me
what the hell is wrong--

I know you
can't help
it--I'm
sorry, I'm
sorry--

hic You
never
deserved
th-this, on
top of
everything
e-else--



Asne, STOP!
I'm not
here to
hurt you.
Cal sent
me to search
for you, but
I was just
to detain
you -- why
in the world
would you
think I was
going to...?



hic He hasn't
told you, then..

Not anything
that would
explain
why you're
hysterical,
no...

I'm pregnant,
Fern.



... You have a
mortal lover, now?

NO, Fern! It's
Cal's!



Are you sure?

... Yes, Fern, I'm
sure.

But..But....
it's generally
understood
that primaries
are sterile...

Only Ell has
had a child...

Obviously,
Cal isn't.



I didn't know
what to do...
I held off until
he started
to notice...

Initially,
he seemed
happy.. I'd
been
scared,
but he
was so
enthusiastic
at first...

But ... I don't
know what..
happened..but
he changed his
mind...he told me
it had to die..He
thinks it will end
up ... like him..
I ran away..

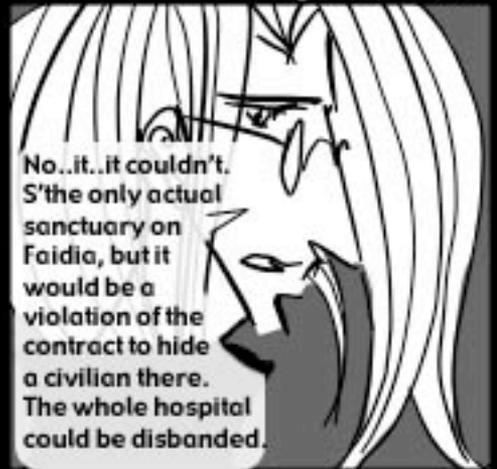


...Oh god. Oh god.

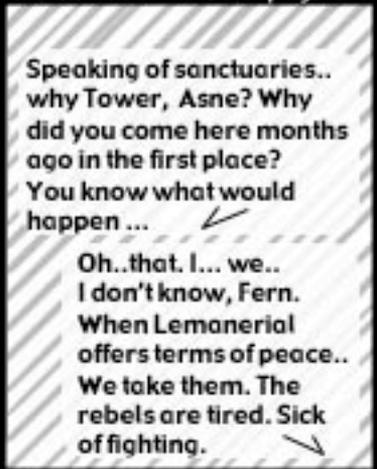
All right. Okay.... okay.
We can .. this will... this might turn out.
I just need time to think.



I don't suppose Annelcey's could have me.



No...it..it couldn't. S'the only actual sanctuary on Faidia, but it would be a violation of the contract to hide a civilian there. The whole hospital could be disbanded.



Speaking of sanctuaries.. why Tower, Asne? Why did you come here months ago in the first place? You know what would happen ...
Oh..that. I... we.. I don't know, Fern. When Lemanerial offers terms of peace.. We take them. The rebels are tired. Sick of fighting.



It was a gesture of trust... If we can't trust him now, we never will.

I didn't know then I was pregnant.. or else.. things would have been different. I hid here after skipping several towns...I didn't think Cal could find me as easily in the city.



If Fola's right, Lem took special note of your presence three months ago ... but we can't know what he's going to do yet...



Won't.. Won't Cal know where I am already, since you know?



I can keep a secret. It just takes special effort.

He could break it out of me if he tortured me enough.. But he won't know beforehand if it'll be worth his time. If I use my cards right, the secret should be safe.

..oh...



... Are you SURE Cal's the father?

Ask me that again, Fern, I'll knock your head clean off.

Okay, okay, sorry.



..It makes me sick that I'm even thinking this...

But it made me sick to find Mid in a bathtubful of his own blood, too. Cal has a point. Just look at Mid. Imagine what this child's life will probably be like. Cal could end it easily. No pain.



I ... I know..I've thought about it.

But I don't.. I don't think it's best.

Cal will make the baby like him by killing it.. and he'll realize that later ...

It'll..it'll simply destroy him.

We need to try...just to know later, whatever happens, that we DID try...

Roe and Lem hurt him because they were scared.. I won't.. I won't let him make that mistake as well.



Okay. I understand that.

Fern, I--

Don't..Don't. You don't have to apologize for this ... This is how it is, now we deal with it the best we can.



I just don't want anyone to hurt from this too badly... Least of all the kid. But we have the most to lose..

I can't stay here .. I can't go to Annelcey's. I have nowhere to go, Fern.



Yes you do! No.. wait.. YES! Why didn't I think of it before?! The Kemfdals! I think there are still some left. If they're amenable, they'll take you in.

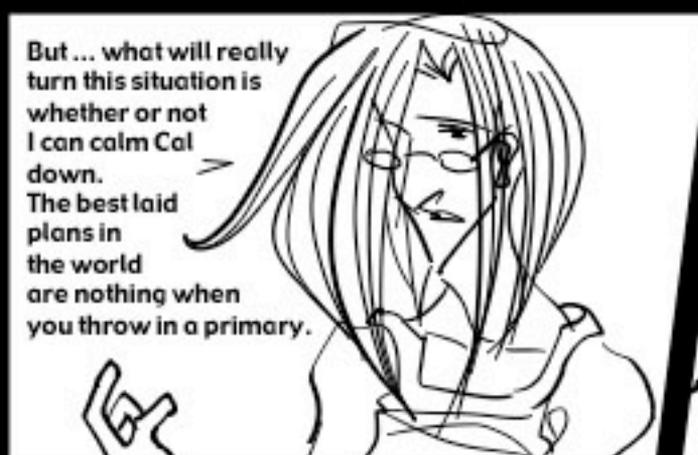
Kemfdals?

A family loyal to the Callanerialians.



But.. would they be able to keep me hidden?

There's old magic in that family. Not very strong, but it might be enough to keep you hidden for as long as it takes. Not forever.. but long enough.



But ... what will really turn this situation is whether or not I can calm Cal down. The best laid plans in the world are nothing when you throw in a primary.



Don't I know it ... Is he.. will he ever get better, Fern?

I dunno, Asne.

I dunno if he would even be himself if he got better.



I gotta talk to the Kemfdals.

Then I'll get to Cal.

Whatever happens.. won't take long.

...Thank you for everything, Fern.

When I finally found and arrived at the Kemfdals, you can't imagine how tired I was.



Of course, like all the sane people on this side of the world, the Kemfdals were all in bed.

I was able to raise two household melceys, Garadian and Shophe.

Apparently the Kemfdals had their own recent share of tragedy ...



The parents had died in one of the halfling riots. Those Kemfdals..always on the bleeding edge of social reform, and paying for every second of it.



They'd left a teenage niece and a 4 year old son. Melceys, you should know, do not bend easily to elemental will...

I was told to come back in the morning.

It didn't matter. Cal was calling me home.

I returned, thinking the jig was up. I couldn't find him in the house.



Cal?
I'm home...

He was in the garden with Smoke.



...Cal?





Fern-- Fern when you were alive, you had children. You were a father.

...Er..yes.. but Cal..

I don't remember..

That, and I murdered them..

Prrr

You didn't hurt them intentionally.. You understand these things-- more than I ever will.



Just look at what you've done for Mid.

I tried, but I failed them all... I need.. I need advice.

...Okay...

I've been doing a lot of thinking and-- I promise not to do anything bad, I just need to talk--

Okay, okay-- it's all right.

Let's talk.

Your advice.



But I think we should go inside first...

Yes-- yes-- but I'm not plotting anything, I'm NOT!

You're freezing cold.

You know I saw Asne, don't you.

C'mon, Smoke...

Shhh, calm down, I'm not leaving..



I'm going to mess this up, Fern, I've already gone too far...

Cal, please. Let's get inside, have a breath, and we'll talk.



Okay.. here we are.

Let's talk.

I've had my finger on its pulse for an hour ... I haven't done it yet .. I could do it any second, just another ruptured vesicle, it'd be as simple as killing anyone. Simpler. There's a reason. So often there is no reason.



Wh.. what made you wait?

Asne ...told you why I..

You don't want it to turn out like you.

I got to thinking about that ... There are other ways of .. accomplish- ing that, aren't there?

Yes.. of course there are...



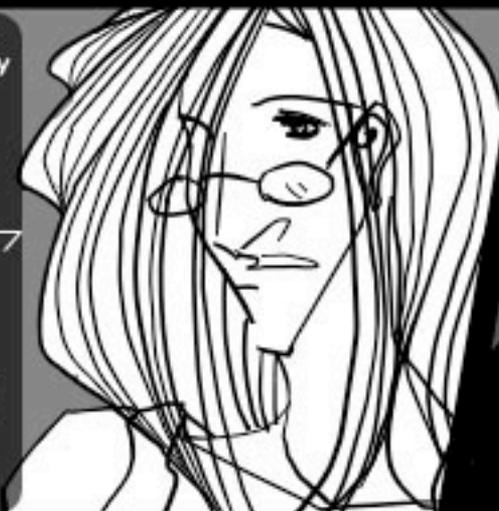
So I don't have to. I don't have to do this .. thing .. There are other ways.

But... I don't.. It can never know I'm its father.

It can't.

Okay. We can do that.

That's fine, Cal. There are plenty of people who live their whole lives quite happily not knowing who their biological parents were. Asne's culture doesn't place any immediate importance on biological relationships, to boot.



I wouldn't want to wake up one day and be told someone like me was my father.

I would be a bad parent. I've been a bad parent ...



Do you understand?



Yes, Cal.

I know this .. is just another way of controlling information. I received a letter from Malley today. About Mid.

Most of his problems stem from memory deletion. I should have known...should've...



I designed him, for crying out loud. I knew, I knew, I underestimated my own skills when it happened to be convenient. I ignored the quintessential precepts of my own work. I convinced myself I could draw one thread of his mind out at a time, when I had just worked so hard to weave them all tightly together. To make him real, only to wish he were unreal again.

Why have I been such a buffoon? I can't even trust my own hands. I ripped holes in his head. I unravelled him. He's undone.

I think..I think this is a bit different, Cal.

What do mortals say? Too many chefs ruin the soup? If I stay away .. it could be all right.



I don't see why not. There are other ways you can help.. from a distance.



And Asne.. Asne.. I won't.. I won't go near her again, either.

Now..hey. Don't you think Asne should have a say in that, Cal?

Fern. I have to break the cycle now, while we're ahead. While everyone is still alive ... still sane.





Miiiiid. Mid?
MID.

Unqqq...
Wh? G'way, Delye,
it's Saturday...



I know, but Fern's already here
n' wants to see you.



... But it's six in the
morning ... I hope
nothing's wrong...

I hope you're
not waking me
up for nothing..



How would I
lie to you?

...no
comment,
De. C'mon.



Whoa.
He's asleep?



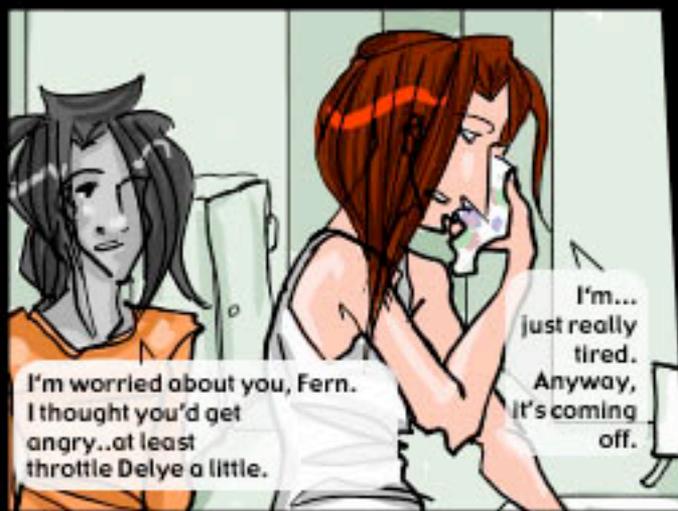
Fern
never
sleeps in
public...
He must be
really tired.

Oh DEAR.
What could
be that stuff
all over his
face?!!



Oh my GOD--
DELYE when
he wakes up
he'll kill
us BOTH!

It's okay Mid,
it's ART THERAPY!



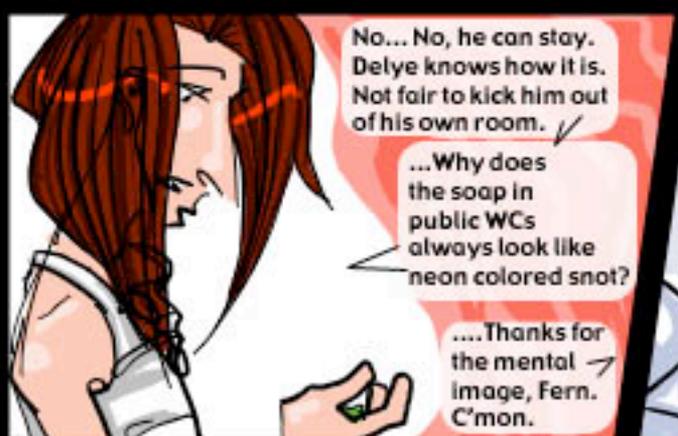
I'm worried about you, Fern. I thought you'd get angry...at least throttle Delye a little.

I'm... just really tired. Anyway, it's coming off.



I see all of your hair's grown back, for better or worse.

Yeah...I've been.. feeling a lot better. Listen...um. I know you came here for a reason.. want me to boot Delye out of the room for awhile, and we can talk?



No... No, he can stay. Delye knows how it is. Not fair to kick him out of his own room.

...Why does the soap in public WCs always look like neon colored snot?

...Thanks for the mental image, Fern. C'mon.



Your room's changed a lot... Give up minimalism?

Heh. Nah. Just.. made it home.

Okay. Let me update you on the Asne situation.



15 minutes later...

So I took Asne over to the Kemfdals' this morning... I'm going to help her settle in later today.

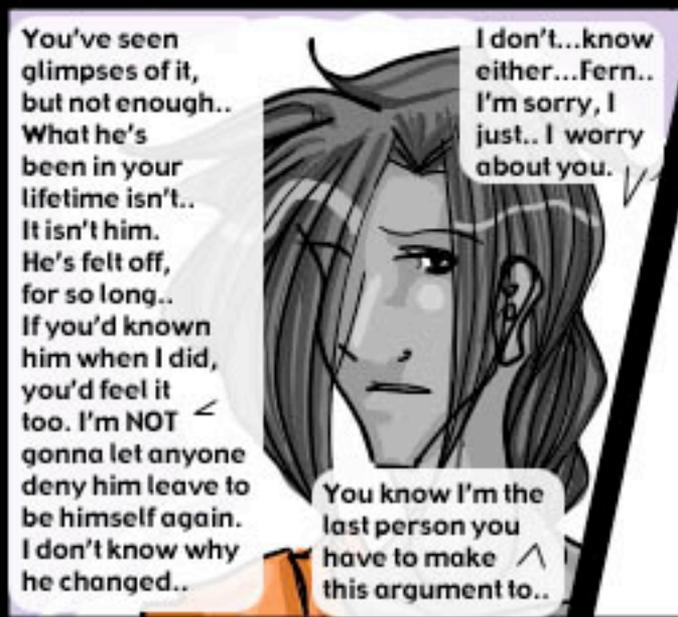
And throughout this entire thing.. except when he threatened Asne.. Cal didn't hurt ANYbody?



You ask that as though it's something amazing.

It's just-surprising, that's all--

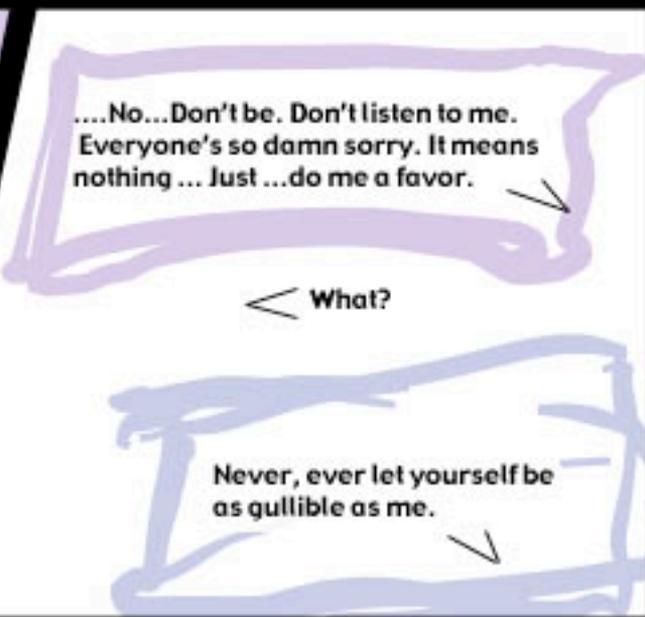
I DON'T dress up the truth, all right? He didn't touch anybody, & he meant what he was saying. I know him.



You've seen glimpses of it, but not enough.. What he's been in your lifetime isn't.. It isn't him. He's felt off, for so long.. If you'd known him when I did, you'd feel it too. I'm NOT gonna let anyone deny him leave to be himself again. I don't know why he changed..

I don't...know either...Fern.. I'm sorry, I just.. I worry about you.

You know I'm the last person you have to make this argument to..



.....No....Don't be. Don't listen to me. Everyone's so damn sorry. It means nothing ... Just ...do me a favor.

What?

Never, ever let yourself be as gullible as me.



I don't think you're gullible, Fern ...

Well...

That's nice.

...



...He said.. He's going to be alone forever. He can't be with anyone without ... It's impossible for him not to be alone.

...That..that isn't really true, is it? I mean... Anything can happen. He's being...just being too negative.

...



Ne'er you mind, Mid. I only wanted to get you on an even keel with everything going on.

Don't feel bad just 'cause you think you should be. It's not your responsibility, no matter how anyone makes you feel. So don't worry about it. Take care of yourself, that's what's important.



No, Mid. I've turned my life around. Now I drown my anxiety in forest frolics and long, intimate conversations with Lem. What do YOU think?

Now could you help me get this off?



He always has hated commiseration... and I always say the wrong thing. It's like we don't know each other ...

You're leaving so soon...?

Yeah...Daresay I'll be back more often now though.

..Are you still drinking, Fern?



You just HAD to notice.



Aw. He was hardly here at all....

Why'd you have to piss him off?

Some things are more important than having fun.



Are you kiddin? That's the **ONLY** important thing.

...That's not a very healthy attitude.

I'm gonna peek in your sketch book.

Go ahead...

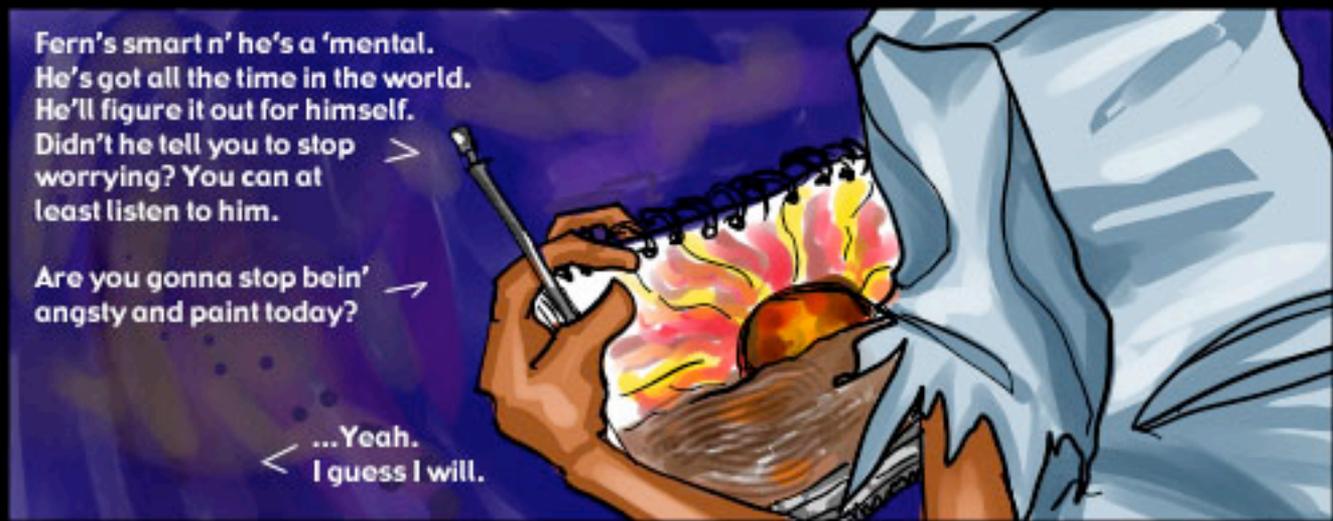
Healthier than yours, sour grapes. What's more important than happiness?



Ever considered that maybe bein' happy's the only thing we're good for? I just mean it's the best thing possible. Not that it's easy. It's hard as fuck. Look at me .. all I wanted to do was dance....

....Yeah...Nobody's gonna give you a map and instructions..

I can't do it for Fern ... Short of that, what can I offer him, when he has alcohol?



Fern's smart n' he's a 'mental. He's got all the time in the world. He'll figure it out for himself. Didn't he tell you to stop worrying? You can at least listen to him.

Are you gonna stop bein' angsty and paint today?

...Yeah. I guess I will.

Looks like you had that dream again, huh?

Yeah...the sun and the waste land.

I feel like I should understand it.. Like what it means is just a thought away...But something always seems to prevent me from making the leap.

Hmm. I dunno. It seems familiar to me too. But I can't think of any legends that have it...

Well...I don't even know if it's that important. It's frightening anyway I told Malley what I could about Rae, though.

Whoa, you think that's all right? He think you made it up?

He said he'd look around. There ARE some vague references in the mythology of monster like creatures...

I'm not really sure all this drawing is going anywhere ... it's awfully slow.

I know a quick way outta here—draw weird sexual stuff. If they attribute your problems ENTIRELY to sex, things go ever so much more quickly.

Pff. Can you imagine handing Malley phallic imagery?

...Yes?

Meanwhile...

click

← You awake out there?

Er--yes sir, very much so, Lemanerial sir.

← Mm.

What am I hesitating for?

← Bring me all the files you can find on the Kemfdals.

So began what was probably my strangest assignment yet. Strange for its domesticity, anyway. And the fact that I had to deal regularly with mortals. Secondaries are more like mortals than primaries are...but the older we get, the more like primaries we become.

Fortunately, I took lots of snapshots.

I had to visit Asne regularly and make sure everything was going okay.

Which meant I had to see the two Kemfdal children, too.

This required some adjustment to my behavior & appearance. One of the quirks of being an elemental is, you begin to forget your face.

My body is a copy of a copy of a copy and so on. I don't really look like my mortal self at all anymore. I mean, how do you remember how many moles you have, and where, and exact little things like the angle of your nose ...? It dims, it smudges, and in the end you end up sketching whatever vaguely looks like what you looked like yesterday. The loss of detail is exponential.

That's what you get for being mind over matter.

Works for me.

Mortals retain all their rough edges. Nature remembers for them, and they don't live long enough to forget what they look like.

Branch members are accustomed to looking at us, but other mortals aren't--to them, we look unearthly. Creepy. Kids don't hesitate to let you know what they think of it.

The Kemfdal children were no exception.

Emwin was 7, & convinced I was a woman. Ceewin... was a teenager. Who hated my guts at first. She hadn't been infused with the Kemfdal loyalty, I guess.

Understandably, they were fallen on pretty hard times since their parents died. Garadian "requested" financial support early on. We were too glad to help.

Asne was much better at all this. She smoothed things over with Ceewin.

I think she was happy.

But I could tell she was sad.

Cal was less so. He was sad, yeah, but outweighing that was the relief of knowing he hadn't hurt anyone. That they were safe meant more. Not being a very physical person helped. I took pictures and kept him abreast with everything as best I could.

And then, of course, the kid was born.



Delye,
come see!
Asne had
her baby!



It's a boy.
He's so
peaceful
looking.

Cal baby.

In that picture anyway...
Though Fern writes he
doesn't fuss much. Very
laid back. Not what
I'd expect from Cal's son...



Huh! So does
this mean you're
leaving the
hospital?



< ...No, what
makes you say
that?

Fern
asked you
in the letter.

And I'm just
wondering
cause...my
rehab is almost
finished, n'
Malley thinks
I should tstart
thinking about
leaving...I don't
have anywhere
to go.

You've got Fern
at least... I woulda
thought you'd be
itching to leave
by now.



Ech, Delye,
I'm sure Malley
would help
you find
something.
It's not as
though
we're not
your friends..
which I
guess means
we are ..Um.
Just. Don't
worry.

Yeah....
You afraid
to go back still?

... I need
more time.



How ridiculous is this?
I think it's going to be harder for me to leave, in the end, than it was to come in the first place.

At Tower

Damnit. Fola, have you been touching my books?



...No.



Where did that mythology go ...

Why do you ask?

...Nothing. Shut up. Go away.

All right.



Wait--on second thought--

side



I need to have a little "talk" with you. How recently have you visited with any of the other secondaries?



Not in several weeks..

Several weeks. Hm. Was there any mention of rumors pertaining to monsters? Did anyone complain of strange dreams?

No, neither of those things happened.

Fola I realize that I may not be altogether specific with you on every issue ... But I do hope that you've been respecting the confidentiality of many of the topics we discuss. I wouldn't like to discover that you've been leaking information about me to the other branches.

I would never consider such a thing, sir.

Good! Then tell me what you know of the Dark Cormor of Stryva.

....It's a legendary monster... Black, with four eyes.. It dwells in a dark cave somewhere on the forbidden southern continent... No proof of its actual existence has ever been found, of course.. Supposedly, it sends bad dreams to its enemies.



The culture that created the Stryva cormor legend is long gone. The only people who know of it are ancient text scholars and elementals... But, continuing to this day, there have been dream monsters in every single Faldian culture

Yes, it's a common motif. But not a unique one. They're strongly featured in many Non-Faldian cultures.



Ah yes. Our resident linguist.

... Why don't you say what it is you're looking for, sir? I can't help you on the basis of a vague reference.

You already know, Fola. All the elementals do. But the memory is blocked. You'll probably forget this conversation even happened.

You're of no use to me...But if mortals found out... And they're so very close...

The jig is up.

I need to preempt them. Fola, collect as many dark, Faldian creatures as you can, and bring them here--preferably sentient ones.





So you want
the Doctor
to help you
with this
project
(sighs)

Yes, I
believe you've
got a chance
I want some
papers and
plans. Be
back here in
10 and you
can discuss it.



What
about
this?

10:00 am



What's the
point? I mean
the money
the money
the money

12:00 am



2:00 am

What's the
point?



Something
isn't right...

What...
What's wrong
for someone
to die.

She dreams.

What...
What's
happening
with the
last number.



What's the
point? I mean
the money
the money
the money



Crisis.
It's about
nature.

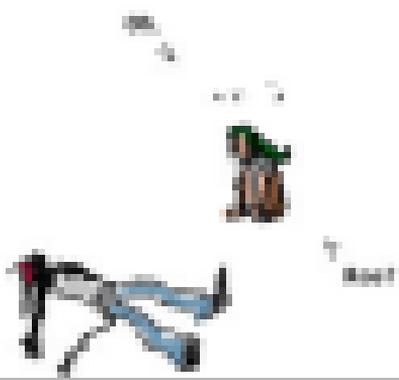
What's the
point?

Right, but because don't
you know! Doesn't mean
anything. It doesn't mean
anything. I'm wearing
suspenders. Therefore
nothing.

Everything is
fine.



Shinji
17



Shinji, You know, you're
still only just starting
to work as a musician
you know.

Shinji
18

—Lain—
19

—Lain—
20
If you
come
here...to
have the
living and
breath out
of you...then
perhaps
I had you
not...perhaps.



—Lain Down Lain,
What are you doing?
Thinking too hard
about that person
what's wrong?

Shinji
19

That...because, No, Lain,
I know you. What do you
mean by those people
around? What's
happening out?

—Lain—
20



Is it like this in here all the time?

Why wouldn't it be? After all, it's May's masterpiece, I sure don't have an aesthetic, and nobody else comes here.

You have connections through Cal, don't you?

You may not have figured this out, Lem-- you're hardly lonely-- but when you have only 2 people, however much they like each other, what goes can only go so far.



Only so far? He hasn't been speaking to you?

I haven't called him. I don't have anything to talk about.

When you're dull, and know it, you avoid company.

Anyway, he has what's-her-face.

Asne... They had a child, you know.

Yeah.

...This...doesn't bother you?

I don't think about it. It's not like I have even a marginal chance of competing, anyway. I don't understand what appeal he finds in her-- I mean, a woman? Ugh. But mostly, I don't think about it.



The only women you've known are your mother and mine.

Exactly. They hardly count.

I can't believe this doesn't bother you.

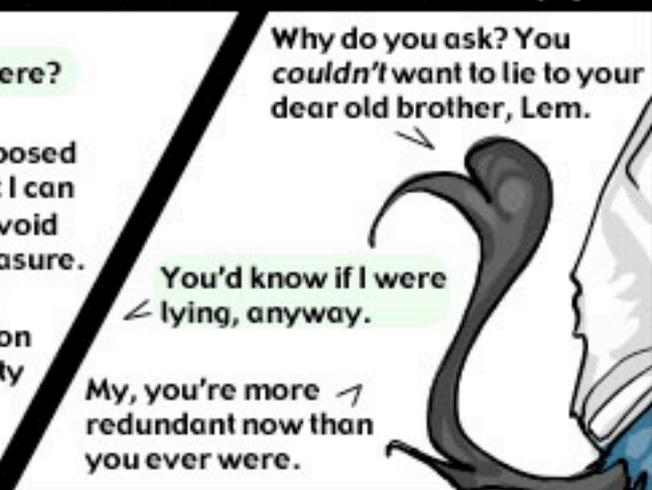
Well, it'll 'ill if 'ou 'on't shuth ub abouth ith.





Can you lie in here?
You're not supposed to ... But I can easily avoid that measure.

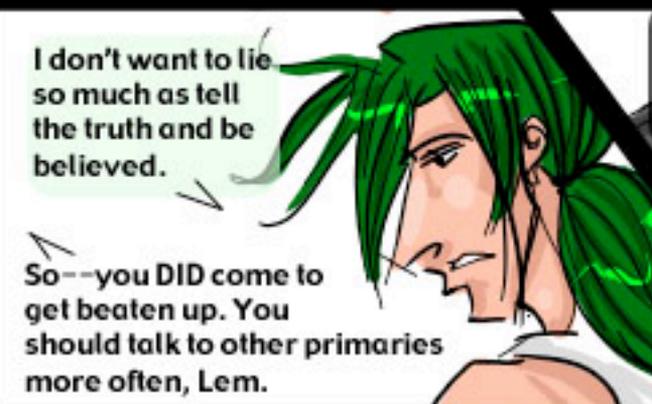
May's definition of lying's pretty rigid.



Why do you ask? You couldn't want to lie to your dear old brother, Lem.

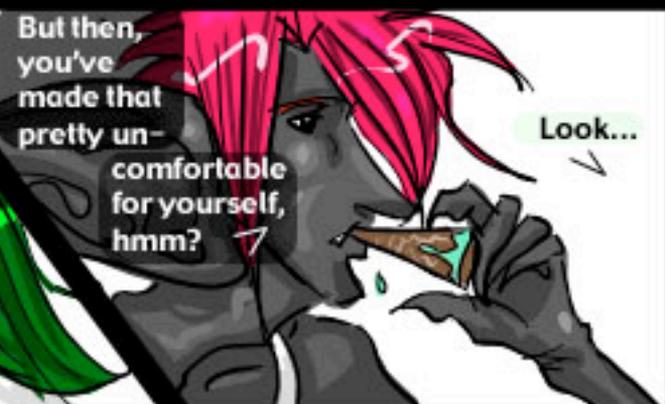
You'd know if I were lying, anyway.

My, you're more redundant now than you ever were.



I don't want to lie so much as tell the truth and be believed.

So--you DID come to get beaten up. You should talk to other primaries more often, Lem.



But then, you've made that pretty uncomfortable for yourself, hmm?

Look...



You're not supposed to help, but you could shut up for a few minutes.

Well excuuuse me, Princess...



...and stop eating ice cream that way.



omph

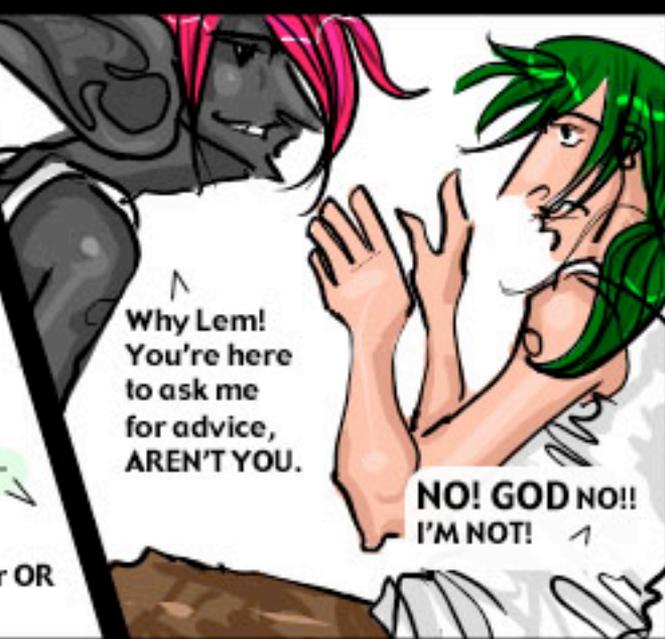


Want anything else? I'll whip up a comfortable, aspidistra-strewn Victorian flat so we can sit in smoking jackets and chuckle in smug satisfaction together. Or perhaps something else?

Sky's the limit, Lem! A boudoir in shades of lavender? C'mon, a guy with a faggy ponytail like yours has GOT to appreciate that.

NO, Rae--

Let's see--if you're not actually here to comment on the decor OR my eating habits....



Why Lem! You're here to ask me for advice, AREN'T YOU.

NO! GOD NO!! I'M NOT!



What about YOU? Who got the full memory? YOU'RE from YOUR mind!



Oh, I see it's a trick, Lame, what's the real you name at all? Or does it...?

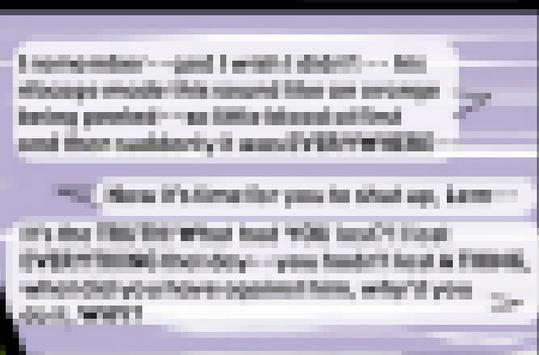


The same word, I remember, don't think about it... The feeling SUICIDES IT!



Whatever happened, Lame, you don't see that either...?

Not to worry, you can't see it with your...



I remember... and I wish didn't... No things made the sound like an orange being peeled... so little blood at first and then suddenly it was...~~FRUITFUL~~

Now it's time for you to shut up, Lame... are you like the what was YOU said? You...~~FRUITFUL~~... memory... you didn't see a...~~FRUITFUL~~... what...~~FRUITFUL~~... you...~~FRUITFUL~~... why'd you...~~FRUITFUL~~... what?



Selective memory, Lame? I might have said that but you didn't...!

I remember!

Your best moments, your own legends say you that!

That's your symptom and you know it...!



Why...why are you looking at me that way?

I don't...quite believe it.
I...I usually don't know.
You have no idea.

Oh what? What
are you talking
about, Rex?



Rex? Agree? no!

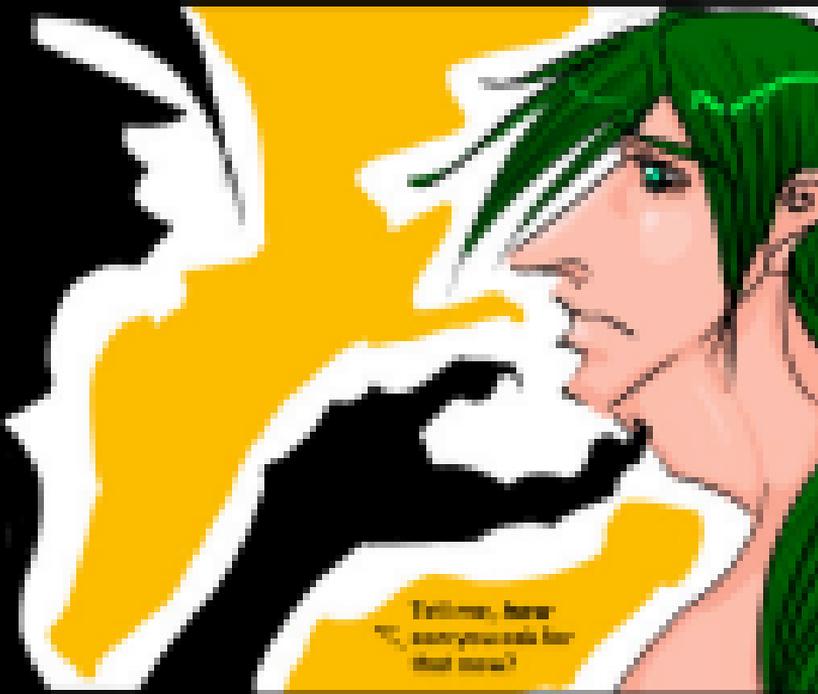
What did I say?
What's wrong with
wanting to improve?



Let's...
I'm sorry
brother,
I don't
like you,
but I do
love you.

Can already
forget all
the things we
before there
even there.

We did it to
him because
we know how
to forget it.



Yes, Rex,
I'm sorry for
that now?



Excuse me,
what was
that, Lord?

If you're not
Ringsman,
what business
do you have
for me to do?

There must
be a reason
for this...



Of course there is.

Why, yes, it's as simple, as
a child.

You're supposed to die.





As the Kumbha'ya,
several years later.



Hi, Anne,
Sorry I'm
late. :-(

Wow! I was waiting
around and you
weren't going
to make it!
:-(

No worries.

Why, look at you. You
look like your shirt was
handmade using machine
app. Why are you not at



Really? Well, you know how
I'm... Being extremely
throughout, wasn't that
never anything... something up

Yes, that's what
I'm. How is it?



Yes. I want
to be making
more things,
especially... you!

Can you be my
partner?
If you want to...
please, send some
pictures your.



Wow, Anne,
that's why?

Yes, I
want to be
with you.

And also...
your help making
things.



Oh, you know how
I'm... Being extremely
throughout, wasn't that
never anything... something up

Really, I want
to be my
partner.



Your mom's
partner...
as I thought I'd
be... partner
to you if you
have an idea
for... partner
with your
partner.



Well, you look
like you know
what you're
doing.

You really
are... :-(

Really?

Yes, I
want to be
with you.

Really?
Yes... :-(



Oh, you know how
I'm... Being extremely
throughout, wasn't that
never anything... something up



Yes, I want
to be my
partner.



Oh, you know how
I'm... Being extremely
throughout, wasn't that
never anything... something up

Really, I want
to be my
partner.

FUCKY...
:-(

There, now, hardly anything to worry about. Why don't you find something more relaxing to do?



Correct, would you let her have your book?

Let's build with blocks.

...Blocks.

They're his favorite toy.



My good with that, too.



Feed. Everywhere to call? What is he going to take responsibility for his little boy?



None of your business, that is a primary... I WILL NOT FEEL I SHOULD ANSWER THAT QUESTION!

Well then... Will I put an FBI report?



Would you stop harassing me, Gail? You're not mentioning my name.

I'm a mother. Emotional blackmail is completely against nature to me.

That's all right...

I wouldn't know, going over her house.



Smoke!
Haven't
seen you
in awhile--
why are you
standing
in the dark?

Hello.

I had a great
time with Corwin
today--I think
he might actually
be fond of me now!

It's hard to tell,
though--he's
not very
demonstrative,
but after awhile
you can tell
when he's happy..



--Er, you're going
to pour me a drink?

I accidentally bounced a ball off
his head, but a few minutes later,
he was fine, and no hard feelings.

That's good
of you--as
I was saying--

I think I might be
all right at this
mortal thing
after all.

Smoke,
what're
you doing
pouring that
m--

glug
glug
glug



AAAAUGGGGHHH!

YOU. POURED. IT OUT.
YOU POURED IT OUT.
YOU POURED MY LIQUOR OUT.

Glug
Glug
Glug



Cal thinks you're
drinking too much.

He wants you
to cut off cold
turkey until you've
withdrawn.

Then he's going
to ration your
intake.

WHY.
Did you
DO.
That.



I do not drink too much.
If there is a problem, it is
because he sees it.



Fern.
You drink
a bottle a
day, at least.
You don't eat.

It doesn't hurt
anything. I do
my work. I'm
responsible.

Now if you'll
excuse me --

It's all gone,
Fern. I threw
it all away.



The closet,
the eaves,
the bed.
Everything's
gone.

He considers
it a vulnerability,
Fern. Your mind
isn't what it used
to be.



So? I'll buy more.

It's not like
this isn't
a big practical
joke anyway--
does he have
any idea what
this is going
to do? It has
to be a joke.
A big, fat,
completely
unfunny joke.



You know ⁷
what he'll
do.



Yeah.
I know.



I'm figuring which
is worse.

So empty in here without the bottles.



You just HAD to clean, didn't you? Now I won't be able to find anything.

What about Asne? Has she been alerted to this scheme?

Yes. Cal wrote her himself.

Very thorough with other peoples' lives, isn't he. And I'd better bend backwards to do what he says! Or who knows what will happen to Asne and Corwin! He'll go batshit again! Oh my! Screw the rest of us!

thmp

You should go to the hospital.

Did he expressly say that?

No. He didn't say not to take you there, though.

No hospitals.

No hospitals.

But I don't want you to see, either.

You've already seen enough, haven't you.



... They can take better care of you. More people.

And you'd be away from Cal for a little while.

I refuse to consider my cowardice.

I can just as easily see it as courage, burnt and out of shape. That's all. So why not.

Go to the hospital, Fern.

Oh, god, Smoke. God.

I'm going to rehab--I suppose that makes me a real celebrity now, doesn't it.

3 days later



I didn't tell you to do that. Why did you bring him to the hospital?

I can't feel him at all, since he's there. >

I haven't gone without him like this... Since...

I've never been without him this long.

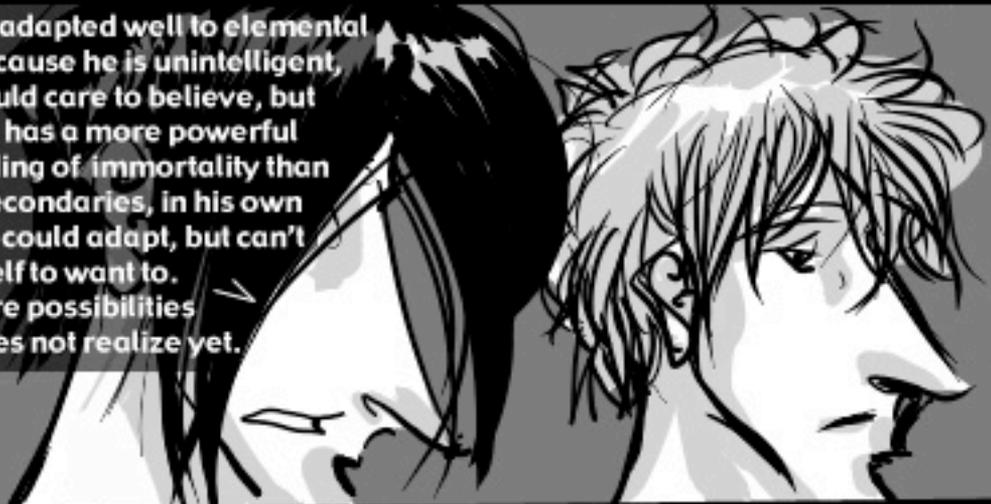
You didn't want us to see him.

He's earned his privacy.

You're exquisitely angry with me, Smoke. I wish you'd tell me of it.



Fern hasn't adapted well to elemental life. Not because he is unintelligent, as Lem would care to believe, but because he has a more powerful understanding of immortality than the other secondaries, in his own fashion. He could adapt, but can't bring himself to want to. But there are possibilities even he does not realize yet.



You told an inadvertent lie.

Not unprecedented.



You've gone without him before. We all have.



Ten years and some months. You don't remember, because you did not watch.



I suppose the sufficient amount and quality of agitation adequate for this topic does not exist.

Still, it's marvelous how calmly you can talk about it.

Smoke. One day, do you plan to tell me what happened when you took him out?

No.





Why not?



I'm not at liberty.
As much as will
ever be known, you
can get from Viv.



The truth belongs to you
alone, then? I have no
right to it?

You waived
that right by
not paying
attention. >

Allow me.
You know I'll use this
to punish myself.
You don't think
I deserve the
satisfaction of
punishment.

Correct. >



The truth may have no obligations, Smoke,
but you do. You have always placed your
obligation to Fern above your obligation
to me.

This is a problem.



I have always let it slide, Smoke-- Why? You have always exercised good discretion in these instances. You are not careless or disrespectful. But, in addition to that, despite years of research, we still don't know what you are, and why you're more powerful than any primary.



You could destroy me. But you don't. The threat doesn't even cross your mind.

I had no home.

You gave me a home. I do what I can to defend it.



Occasionally, I can defend Fern.

But I rarely, if ever, can defend you from yourself.

If I could, I would.



..... Dawn is here.

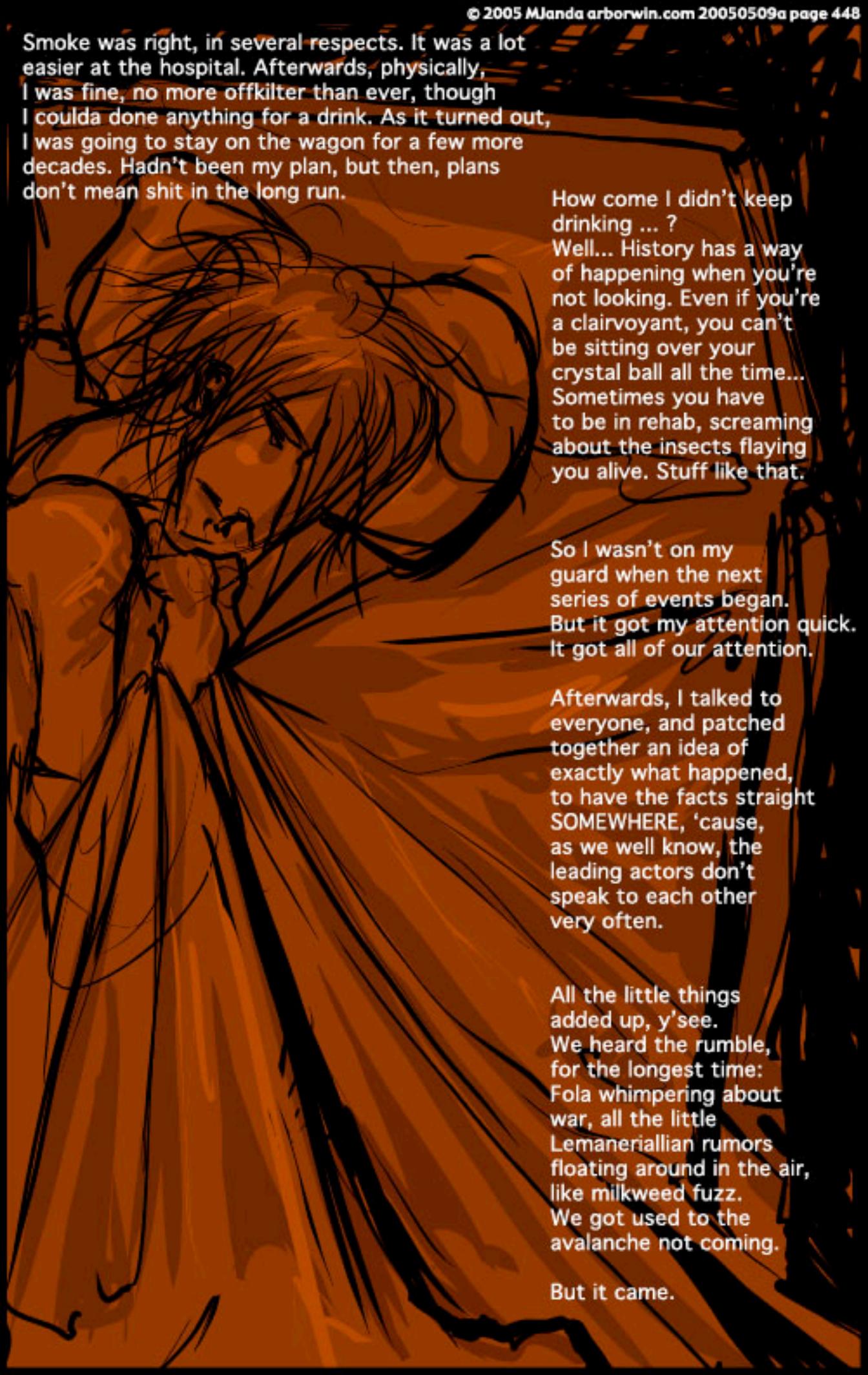
.....
When will Fern be home?

Several weeks. The doctors said he was progressing well.

But the hardest is to come.

He'll be fine.





Smoke was right, in several respects. It was a lot easier at the hospital. Afterwards, physically, I was fine, no more offkilter than ever, though I coulda done anything for a drink. As it turned out, I was going to stay on the wagon for a few more decades. Hadn't been my plan, but then, plans don't mean shit in the long run.

How come I didn't keep drinking ... ?

Well... History has a way of happening when you're not looking. Even if you're a clairvoyant, you can't be sitting over your crystal ball all the time... Sometimes you have to be in rehab, screaming about the insects flaying you alive. Stuff like that.

So I wasn't on my guard when the next series of events began. But it got my attention quick. It got all of our attention.

Afterwards, I talked to everyone, and patched together an idea of exactly what happened, to have the facts straight SOMEWHERE, 'cause, as we well know, the leading actors don't speak to each other very often.

All the little things added up, y'see. We heard the rumble, for the longest time: Fola whimpering about war, all the little Lemanagerialian rumors floating around in the air, like milkweed fuzz. We got used to the avalanche not coming.

But it came.



Smoke tells me he was in his Tower office, working on the Archives as usual.



One of the computer technicians popped his head in to let him know --

Sir, Vivanerrial is here. He wishes to speak with you.

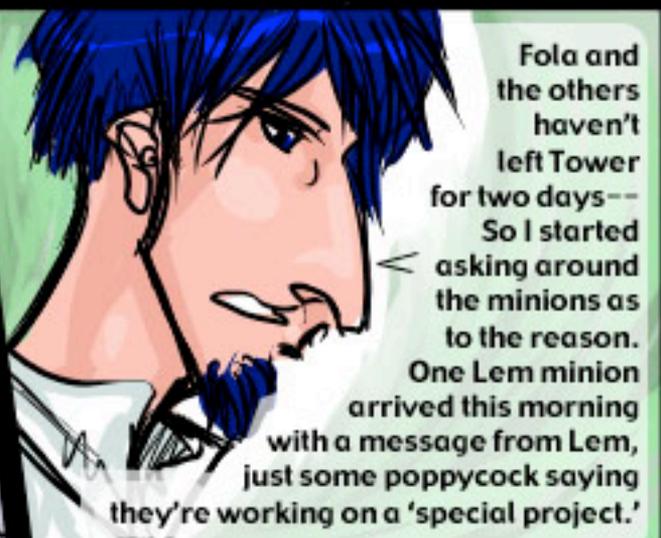
Okay. Send him in.



Smoke, I'm afraid I have some pretty distressing news-- But Fern being incapacitated and all--

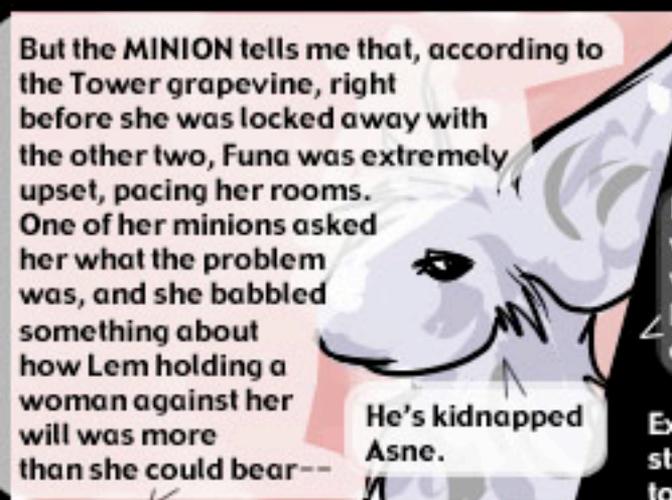
Please, go ahead.

I hope this is just another rumor, but my gut tells me it's true.



Fola and the others haven't left Tower for two days-- So I started asking around the minions as to the reason.

One Lem minion arrived this morning with a message from Lem, just some poppycock saying they're working on a 'special project.'



But the MINION tells me that, according to the Tower grapevine, right before she was locked away with the other two, Funa was extremely upset, pacing her rooms. One of her minions asked her what the problem was, and she babbled something about how Lem holding a woman against her will was more than she could bear--

He's kidnapped Asne.



Yeah, there you have it. Think it's true?

I don't know what else would cause Funa such agitation.

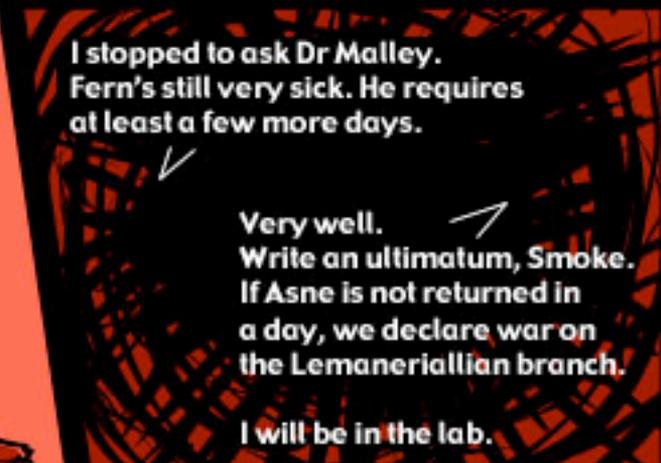
Exactly. It's too strange not to be believed.

I have to leave before anyone notices I'm here-- but mark my words, Smoke -- whatever this is, it's bad. Very bad.



He didn't need to tell Smoke that! But when Smoke told Cal the news, he was unusually calm, asking the much-repeated question--

When is the soonest time Fern can come back?



I stopped to ask Dr Malley. Fern's still very sick. He requires at least a few more days.

Very well. Write an ultimatum, Smoke. If Asne is not returned in a day, we declare war on the Lemanerrialian branch.

I will be in the lab.

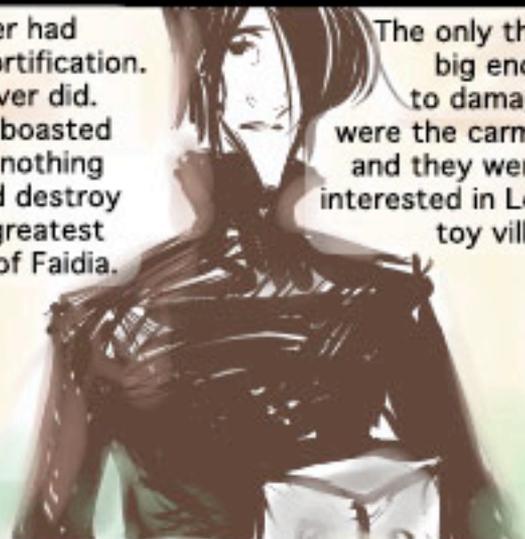
Lem was quick to reply. At first he denied the charge, but Garadian's testimony quickly shot that down -- before Smoke had a chance to confront him with the proof, Lem'd already delivered his second statement--he had Asne, and "there was nothing we could do about it."

That was around 9 o'clock in the evening. The rest of the night, Cal stayed in his lab. Smoke issued the war declaration, but it was ignored. Morning came. Millions of Tower residents got up as usual and went to work, oblivious. The war declaration was not released to the press.



Tower had no fortification. It never did. Lem boasted that nothing could destroy the greatest city of Faidia.

The only things big enough to damage it were the carmors, and they weren't interested in Lem's toy village.

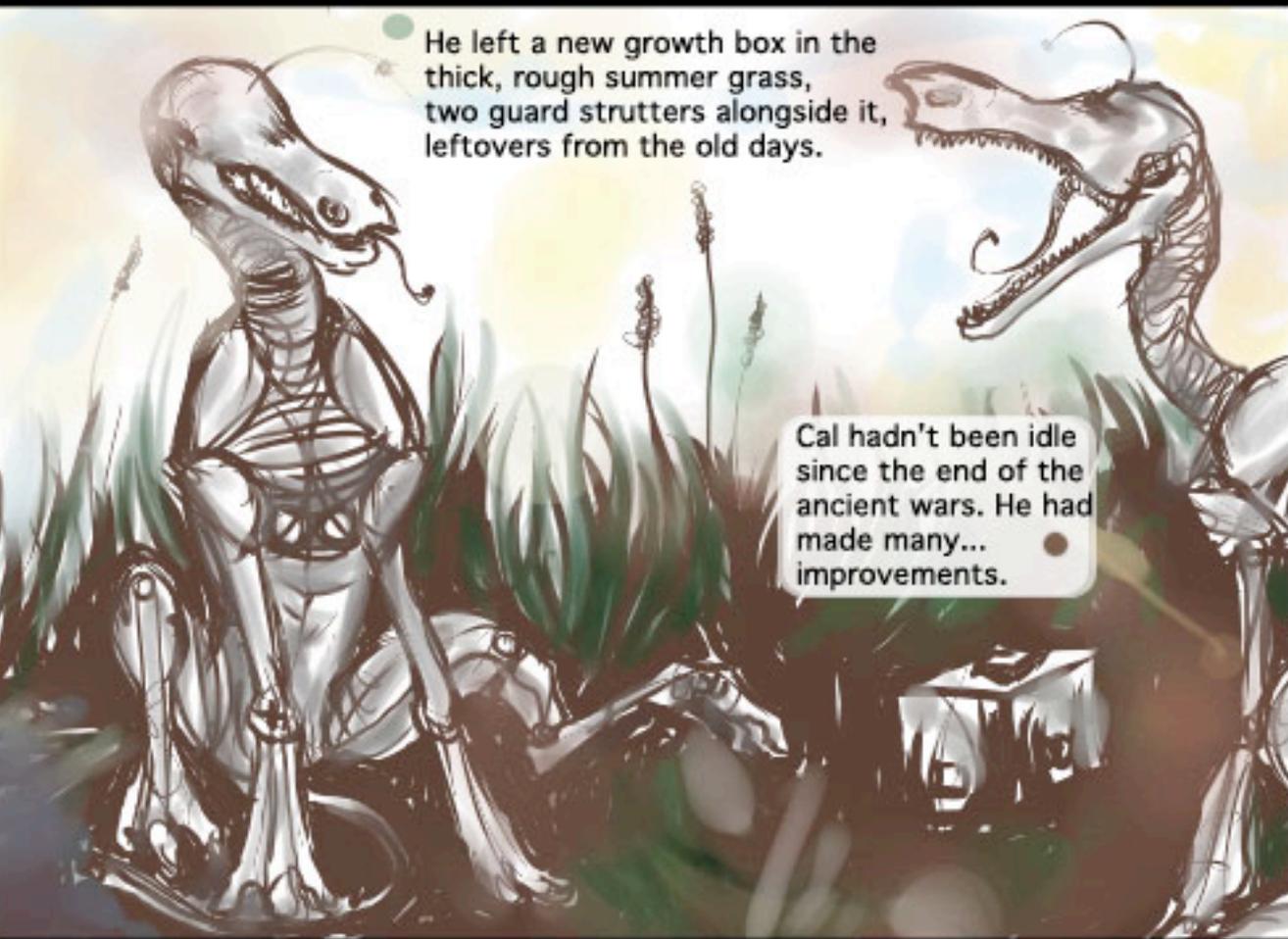


So, of course, no one from Tower would have cared even if they had noticed that Cal paid the savannah a visit that morning.



He left a new growth box in the thick, rough summer grass, two guard strutters alongside it, leftovers from the old days.

Cal hadn't been idle since the end of the ancient wars. He had made many... improvements.



I imagine if I hadn't been in hospital, Cal would have used me instead—but I'm jumping ahead of myself.



As for me, as soon as I was lucid enough to understand Smoke's message, I left the hospital. I had to speak rather harshly to Malley to get him to release me. But, mortals just don't understand these things.



I didn't know anything at the time-- Just that Lem had Asne, and Cal hadn't given me any orders. So I went sleuthing myself.



I found Funa at Viv's-- Lem had sent her away for being stroppy. She informed me, helpfully, that I looked like ten miles of bad road.

AUGH! Fern!



Thanks, Funa-- Why are you just standing here? War's been declared, you know.

This is an akky. Lem dropped all his normal duties on us so he could spend all his time with Asne.



I know you're risking a lot, talking to me. Do you know why he took her, Funa?

I think you already know. He's terrified of dying. No one had a child with a primary before Asne. Lem has it set in his head that she can provide him with an heir, too.



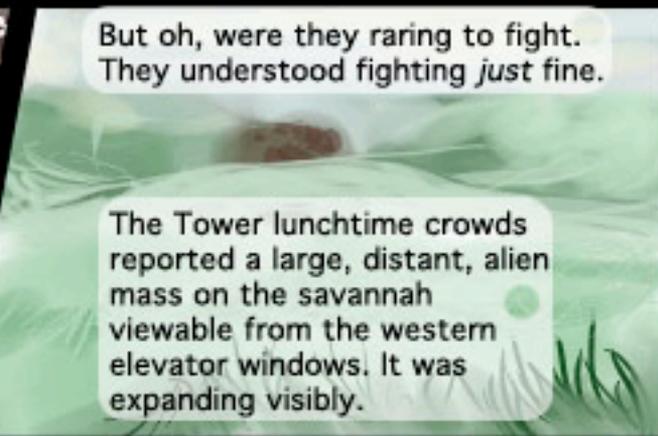
And that was it.

It was yet another primary's twisted, fumbling attempt to combine elemental and mortal values. Neither Cal or Lem fully understood the ethical perversity and wastefulness of the situation.



But oh, were they raring to fight. They understood fighting just fine.

The Tower lunchtime crowds reported a large, distant, alien mass on the savannah viewable from the western elevator windows. It was expanding visibly.



By sunset, the object had ceased to grow, but had started moving. The sight was enough to cause some of Lem's more sensible Guards to order an evacuation of Tower's lowest levels.

An aerial lookout later attested to seeing Lem lean out his window at this point, apparently having taken a break from harrassing Asne, and shout something. I imagine it must have been something like --

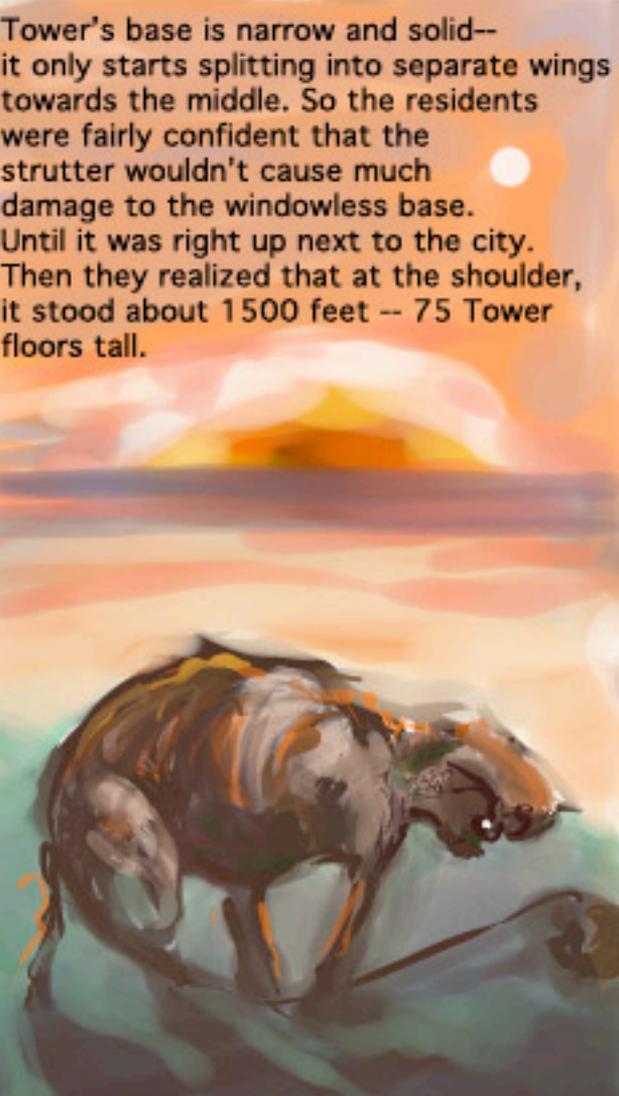
Oh, shit.





The funny thing is, Tower's first impression was that Kezper, pounding towards them in a shroud of vague savannah mist, wasn't really that big.

They were seeing it at such a distance that they did not realize that if it were as small as they thought it was, they should not have been able to see it at all.



Tower's base is narrow and solid--it only starts splitting into separate wings towards the middle. So the residents were fairly confident that the strutter wouldn't cause much damage to the windowless base. Until it was right up next to the city. Then they realized that at the shoulder, it stood about 1500 feet -- 75 Tower floors tall.



This strutter wasn't frightening because of its appearance or its disposition, but because it was *colossal*.



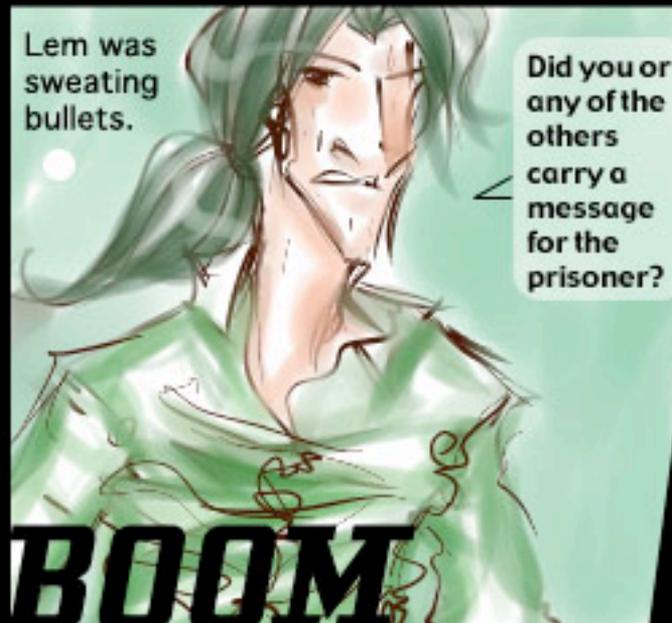
The tank wasn't designed for complicated vocalization, just something to raise the hairs on their necks. The more dramatic newspapers described its roar as a deep, reverberating bass note that caused more tactile vibration than actual sound; it rattled pictures off the walls.



Tower held its breath--

--and the first smash came. The bedrock held for the first four or so strokes of Kezper's bony tail, and then eddies of cracks started to flow through to the central supports. Shards of rock the size of houses slid to the ground.

People started to panic.

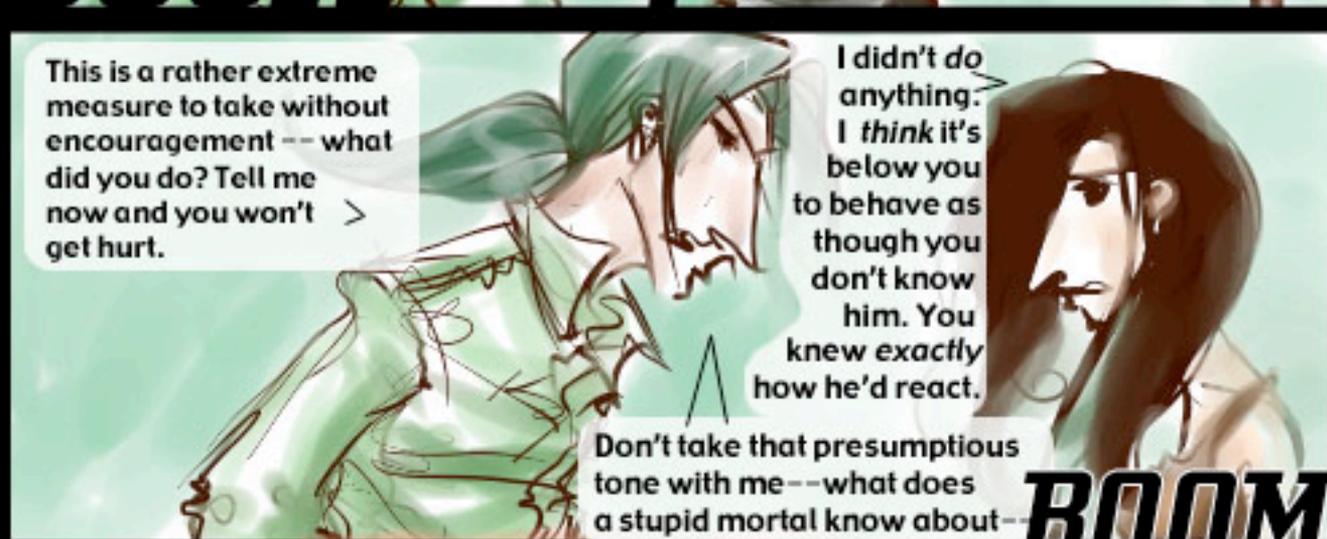


Lem was sweating bullets.

Did you or any of the others carry a message for the prisoner?



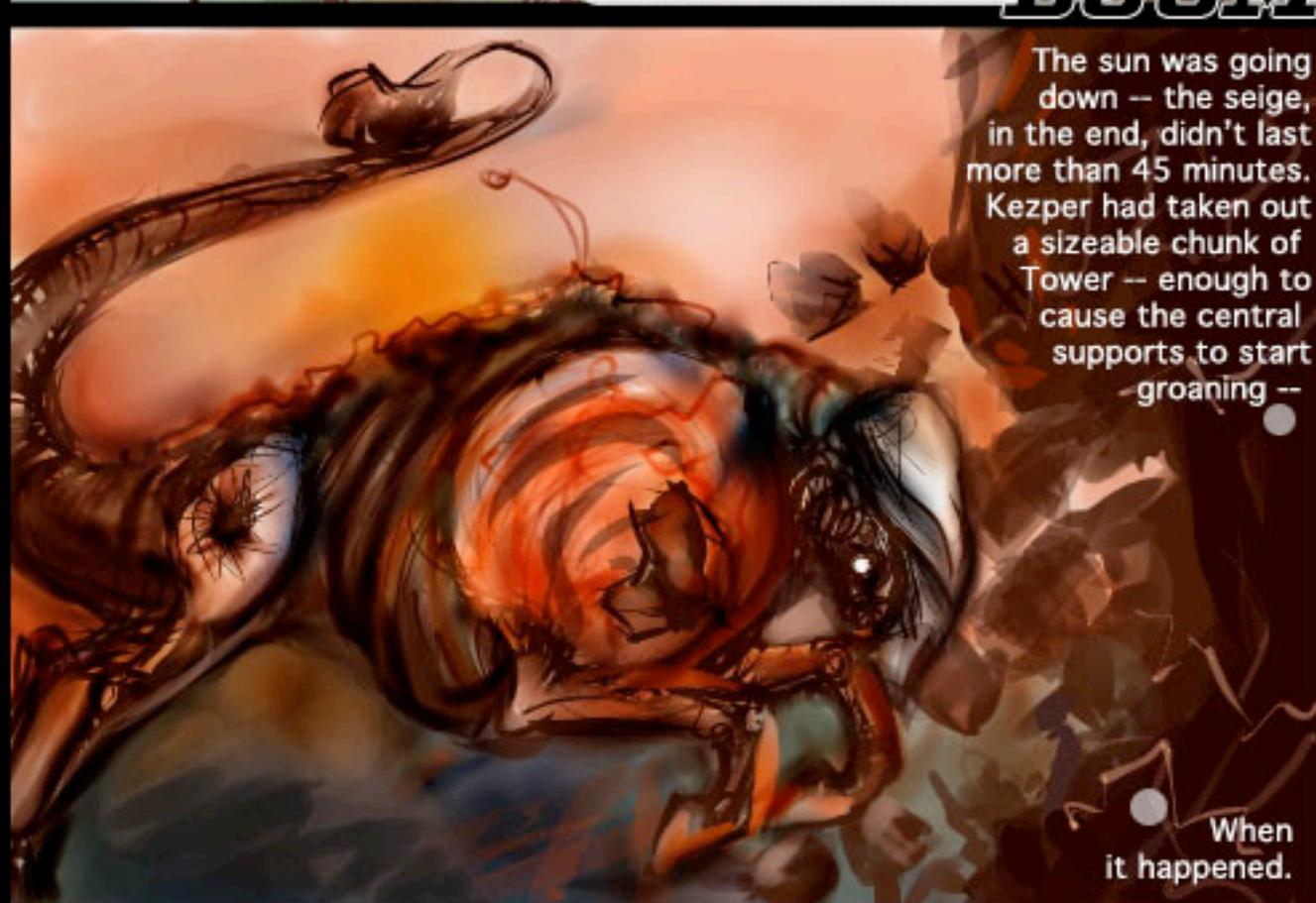
Sir, no messages have left this room. I haven't taken my eyes off her since you summoned me.



This is a rather extreme measure to take without encouragement -- what did you do? Tell me now and you won't get hurt.

I didn't do anything. I think it's below you to behave as though you don't know him. You knew exactly how he'd react.

Don't take that presumptuous tone with me -- what does a stupid mortal know about --



The sun was going down -- the siege, in the end, didn't last more than 45 minutes. Kezper had taken out a sizeable chunk of Tower -- enough to cause the central supports to start groaning --

When it happened.

Carmors appeared from the north. This in itself was not unusual. Few people in Tower paid much attention to them at first, assuming they were a normal convoy looking for carrion, and would retreat.

But they were no everyday carmors. They were Faidia's largest, proudest, and finest.

They were organized.

Carmors obeyed only one master. Only that master could have sent them there that evening.

That master was Faidia. The planet itself. We knew in that moment what the carmors meant.

The elementals had abused their privileges too far. The planet was fighting back.

Considering the tank wasn't equipped for anything as complicated as combat, Kezper did pretty well with it.

It beat a retreat from the carmors, gaining the ground it needed to charge them.

By that time, Cal had left his lab to come view the proceedings from a safe distance -- the carmors were one of the only things that I ever saw him drop his jaw over.

...He got over it quickly. I followed him, no objections forthcoming.

I half-expected orders, but they never came -- I think we were all too stunned to even think.

The carmors sat back and watched it with something like smug satisfaction...

Pound for pound, the tank was bigger and heavier; it could crush the carmors' delicate, hollow bones if it rammed or fell on them.

But it couldn't match the carmors' cleverness, speed....or, as it turned out, geographical savvy.



Most of the land around Tower was riddled by an ancient melcey warren. Many of the burrows had been abandoned, and while normal people and vehicles could move across them without even knowing the antiquated tunnels were still there... The old underground supports had not been built for behemoths. The tank broke through like a bowling ball

- dropped in quicksand.



Within minutes, the tank's rear legs were swallowed by one of the deep sinkholes. Struggling, it churned and loosened the earth, breaking the thin walls of the burrows.

- It was literally swimming in what had just previously been solid ground.



Once its legs were stuck, the carmors moved in for the finish-- one broke a rib off, digging in to find the main

- computer--

While the other ripped out the spinal cord, rendering the tank's flailing tail useless.

-

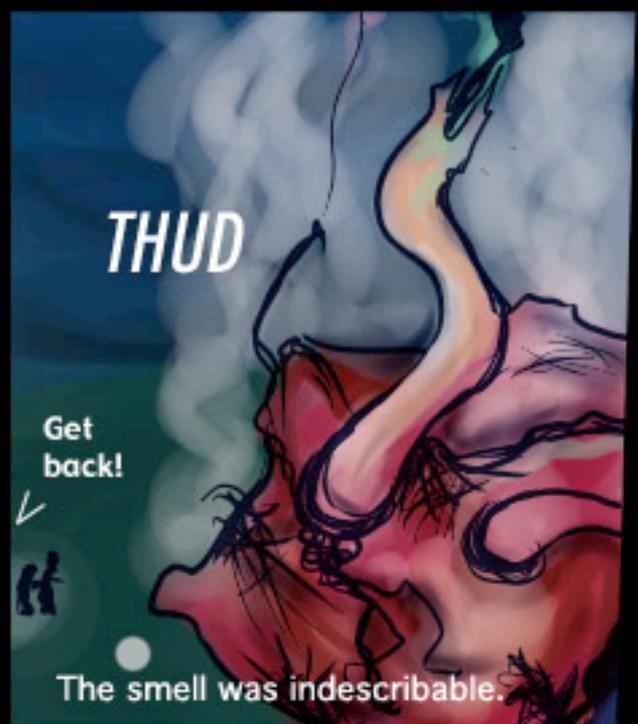


Out came the main computer, and it was all over for the tank.

Cal just stood there, flabbergasted.



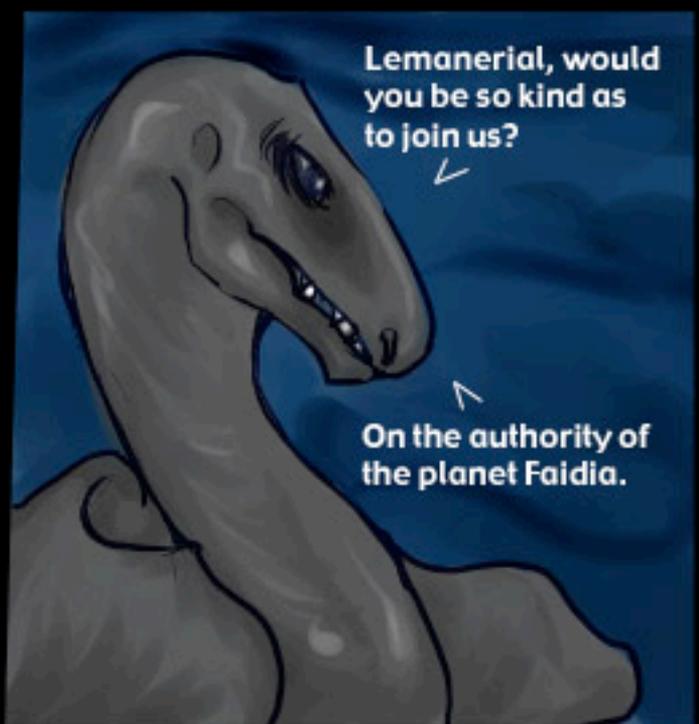
Um. Cal. Um. I think he's going to drop it on --



THUD

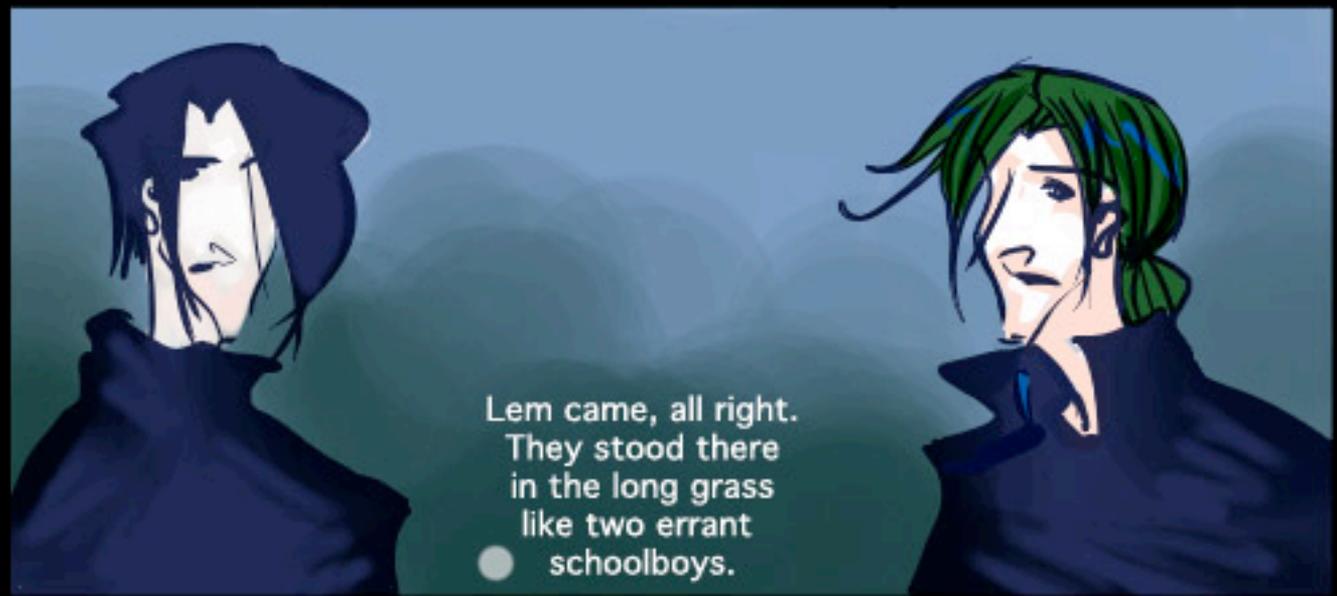
Get back!

The smell was indescribable.



Lemanerial, would you be so kind as to join us?

On the authority of the planet Faidia.



Lem came, all right. They stood there in the long grass like two errant schoolboys.

Faidia will no longer tolerate careless, wasteful, elemental destruction.

You have far surpassed the sacred bounds by which your behavior was defined in the founding days.

By choice, the woman is Faidia's, yet you two, who hold no legitimate claim, fight over her possession.

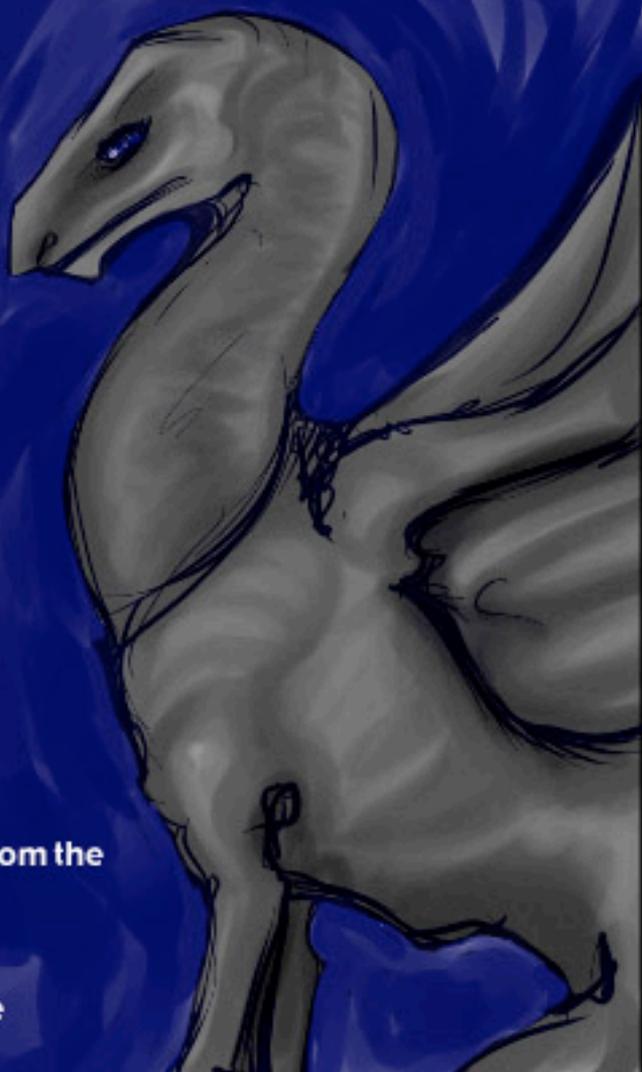
Lemanerial would not have his biomass without Faidia's cooperation. The fate of living things is a slice of the planet's.

Faidia protects her investments.

Your quarrel is now over. The woman is beyond either of you.

And before I go, a little word of advice from the planet.

You may disobey other peoples' rules, elementals, but at least give some credence to your own.



Wait a minute!
I'm not done with
you!

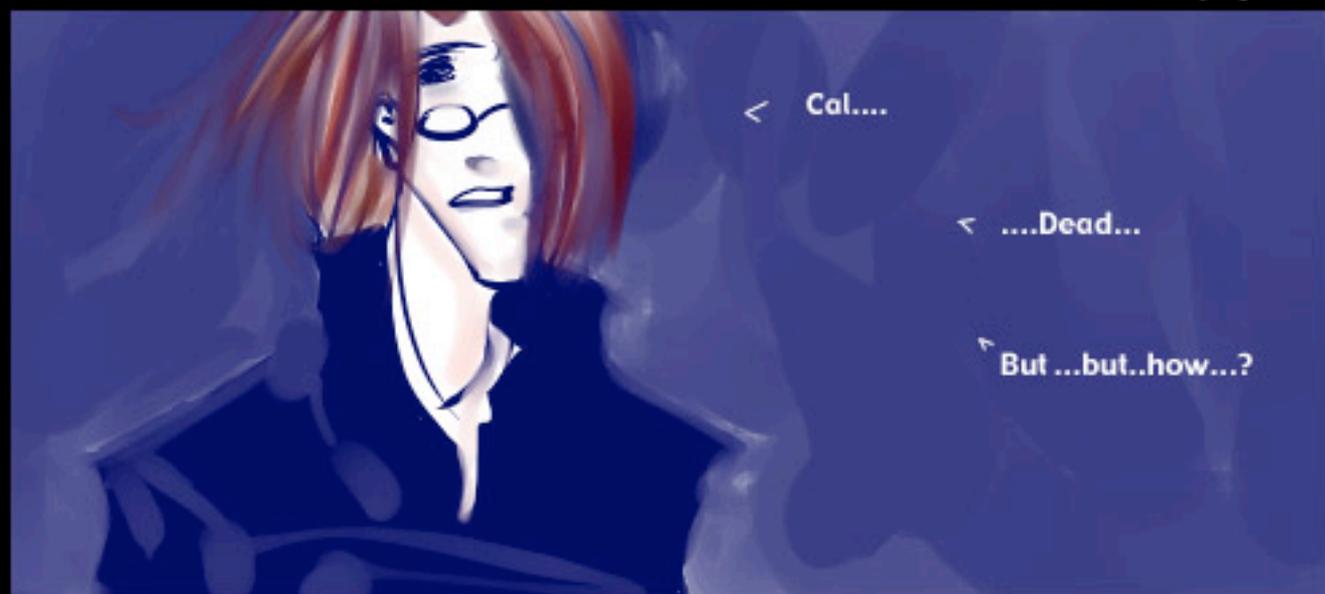
Oh come off it, Lem.
You hardly have
control over
this conversation--

Fern. >

What, what is it?

She's dead. Asne's dead.

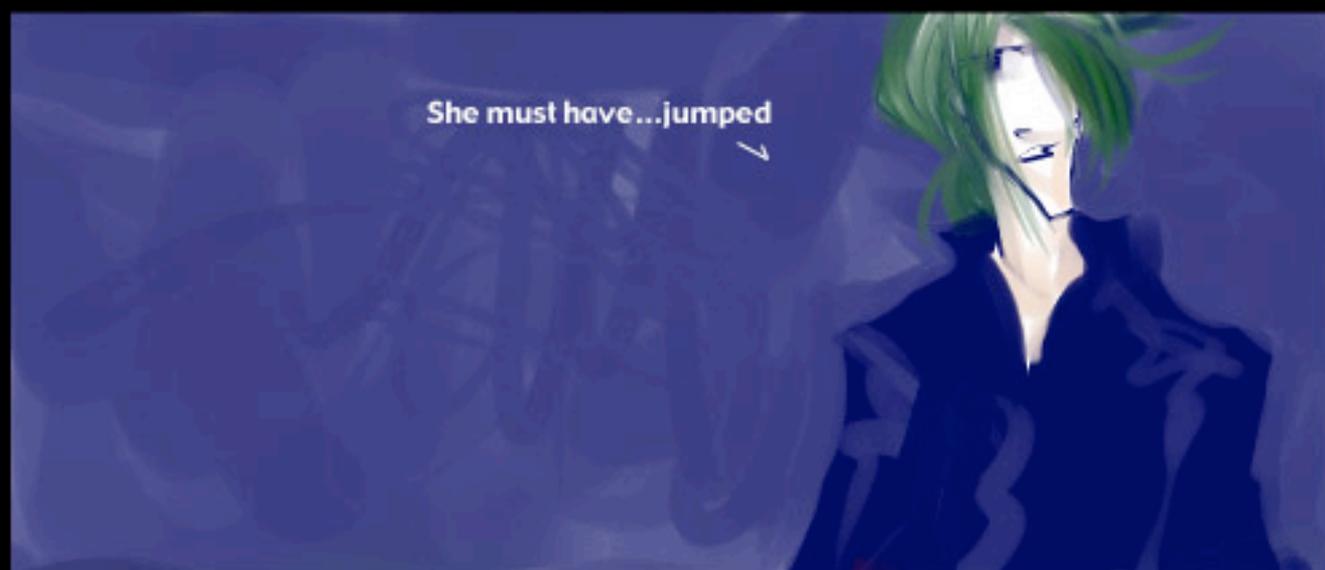




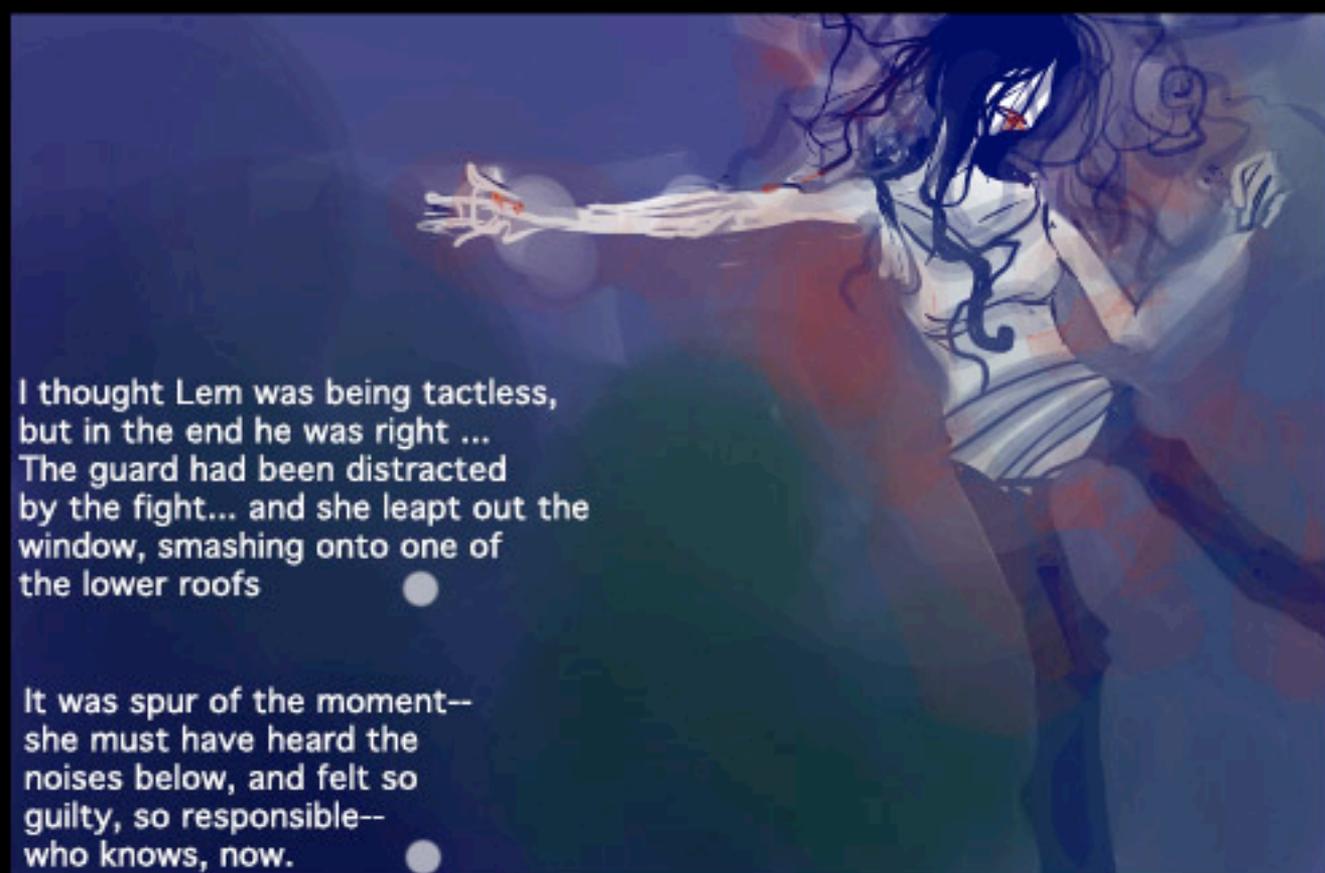
< Cal....

<Dead...

↖ But ...but..how...?



She must have...jumped ↘



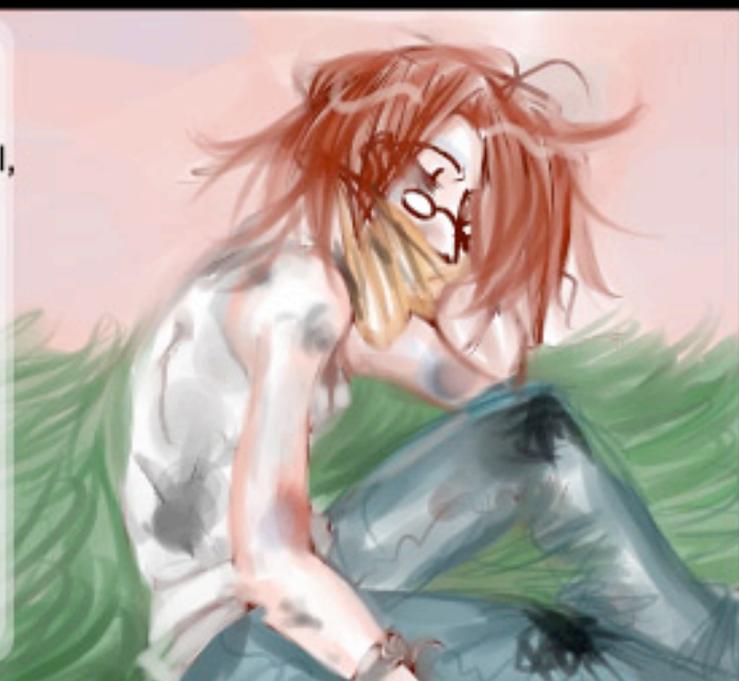
I thought Lem was being tactless, but in the end he was right ... The guard had been distracted by the fight... and she leapt out the window, smashing onto one of the lower roofs ●

It was spur of the moment-- she must have heard the noises below, and felt so guilty, so responsible-- who knows, now. ●

My own memory gets sketchy at this point. Cal and Lem disappeared. The carmors butchered the carcass, removing all the metal for recycling. I had to burn the rest and stay on to control the flames. It took a very long time and a lot of effort. It would have taken months for mortals. At 5 am, I quenched the flames. The carmors buried the rest.



Sometime during the night, I dismantled the main box to salvage the main computer, but amid the burning flesh, shrapnel, darkness and smoke, I couldn't find it. I searched whenever the carmors got off my back, but by morning, I had staggered empty-handed to a tussock upwind of the work site and sat down in a daze. I guess I was still sick, because I wasn't thinking clearly at all. Every little mental process took a mountain of effort. My head hurt. I just wanted to sleep.



That's how Ell found me.

Fern? Are you awake?

Whzz?



Come on, Fern. I'm here to take you to the hospital.

No I--I gotta go tell Corwin--

Viv's already gone. I'll explain later. Come, dear.



I didn't get out of hospital for a few more days. They kept me sedated so I wouldn't leave again.

When I finally got home, I went to check on Cal in his bedroom.

Hadn't been up there in years...Smaller than I remembered.

Cal?
Can I come in?



Smoke told me you were here. Everything okay? You aren't waiting for us to stop watching so you can cut off your ears or something like that, are you?

No.

Well, I gotta say, your color is good.

...yours too.

Yeah. Um. Can I take a load off?

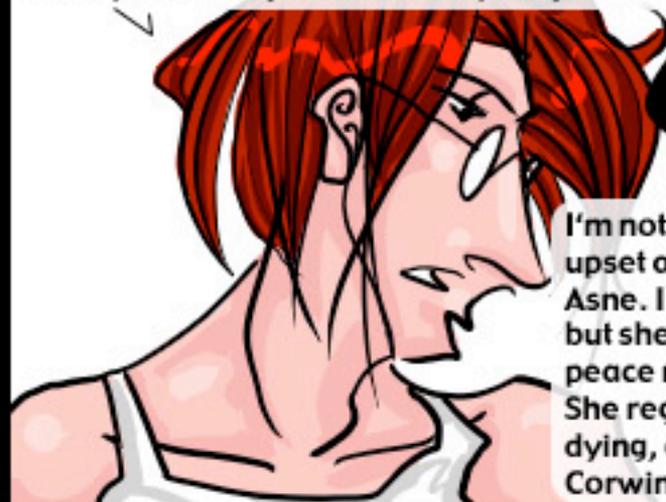
Yes.



Cal. This mattress is history.

It works fine if you know about the hole!

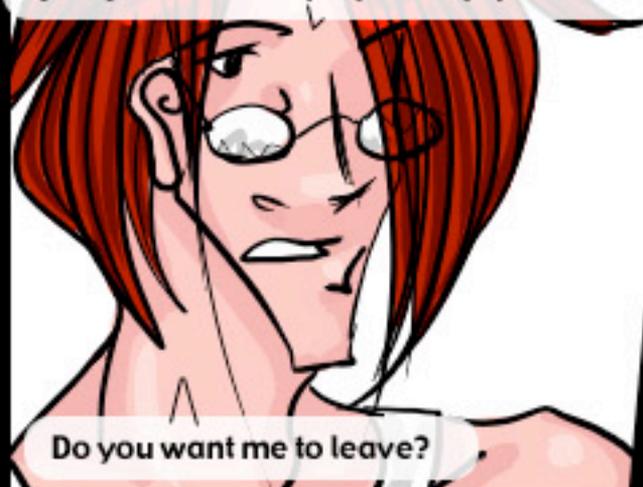
Maybe it's presumptuous of me to assume I can comfort you in any way ... But when something bothers you, it bothers me ... Asne was my friend, and I'm upset about her, but you--



I'm not upset about Asne. I was... but she's at peace now. She regretted dying, and leaving Corwin..but that's all.



You're not upset about Asne? What is this, then? Are you going to make me play twenty questions?



Do you want me to leave?

No. That's not it.



It's something I want to ask you...that I know will anger you.

Well hey, that's pretty broad.



I want to see Corwin.

...You're right. That does anger me.

You made me **SWEAR** not to let you near him, Cal, you made me **SWEAR**. He's a **LITTLE BOY**, not a **TOY**, not an antidote for **GRIEF**. He's **ALIVE**.



You **KNOW** what you'll do, Cal, you **KNOW**.

Yes.. yes...

I feel like I should be doing something. I'm his father, his mother just died, I should be there--

Are we incapable of ethical decisions, Fern? Is there nothing we can do that is ever right, because of what we are?

But I shouldn't, because I'm not mortal. I'm not entitled to care.

Even if we can't, it's no excuse to stop trying.

Mortals have trouble figuring out what's right, too.

But I've been thinking for 5,000 years, Fern. Mortals make ethical decisions in a fraction of that time. What does it take?

We're capable of ethics, Cal-- I can't believe that we're incapable of making good decisions. We can do what mortals can, there's no use doubting--

Maybe among our own. In our own vacuums of single ideas. But everything worthwhile, we must borrow.

Like love. Take it out on loan from the mortals. It doesn't feel real, and I just...destroy things. What have I got to give you or Corwin or Asne? Some harsh, cheap facsimile. Parasitic.

How about tomorrow, you come with me and watch Corwin play in the backyard from the woodline. You have to behave yourself.

....Okay.

So the next day, I visited Corwin.



EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

After what I'd said to Cal, I felt like a hypocrite—it's hard to remember your troubles watching a kid play tag with himself.



EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE



EEEE



When I finally put the kid to bed and went out, there was Cal. He'd stood in the woods all day, in the exact same position, like one of the trees.

Despite everything, I felt terrible. But he didn't. That calm, unfatiguable patience, edging on obliviousness...reminded me of how things used to be.

He didn't really understand about his mother. Asked where she was a lot...

He wanted to watch a movie, so I stayed pretty late...

Lucid moments like these were nice, but they made me sad, because I knew they wouldn't last.

When he's himself, I can't imagine him raising his hand to anyone. I wish he was always angry, so I could forget him. But I still see him.

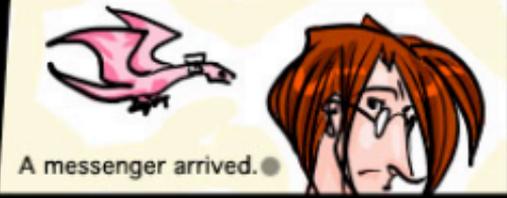
Why are you mad? Did I do something?

No. Shut up. I'll make you some crepe at home.

I think if we'd been left alone then for awhile, things might have gotten a lot better. I don't think we imagined things could go any lower than they already had.....



About a month after Asne died, I was helping another nillit Smoke had found in the blender.



A messenger arrived.



I wasn't really alarmed at first.



Cal, Emwin writes that Corwin's missing again.

He really needs to stop wandering off. Well, the melceys will find him.



But they didn't find him.

COOOORWWWIIN!

By noon, we'd joined the melcey search party, scouring the woods.



He wasn't dead—but what we didn't realize until dusk was that we couldn't feel him at all. He'd disappeared completely, and it took meticulous scanning to find the one clue left--

Cal ...



The forensic melceys are finished.

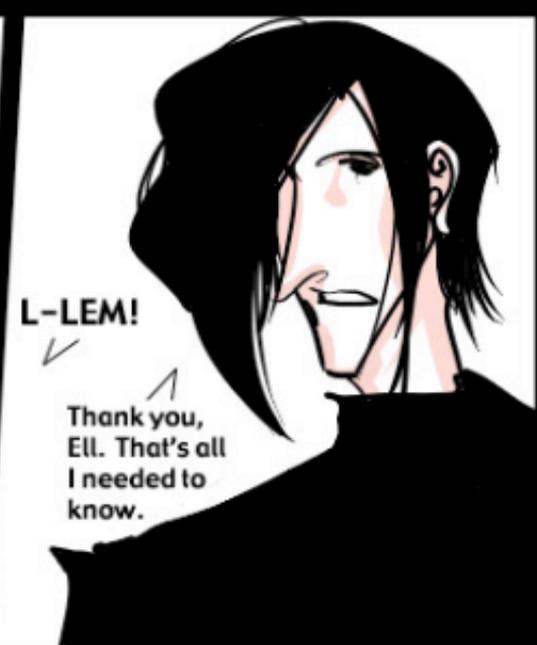
Only the time melcey came up with a trace. Someone sent him through time, Cal.

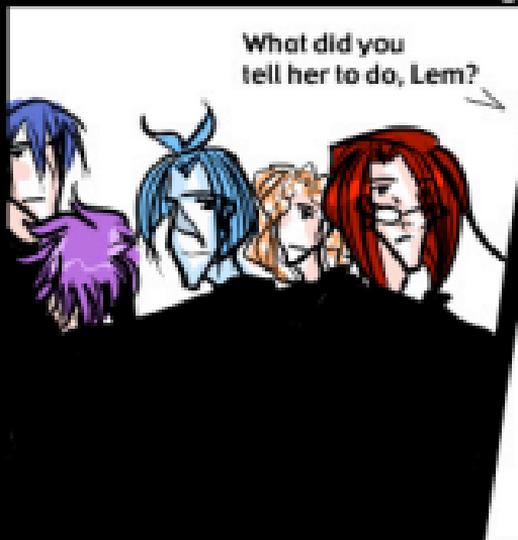
There's no crestil print, either. And it was too strong for a minion.

It was a direct hit. From an elemental.

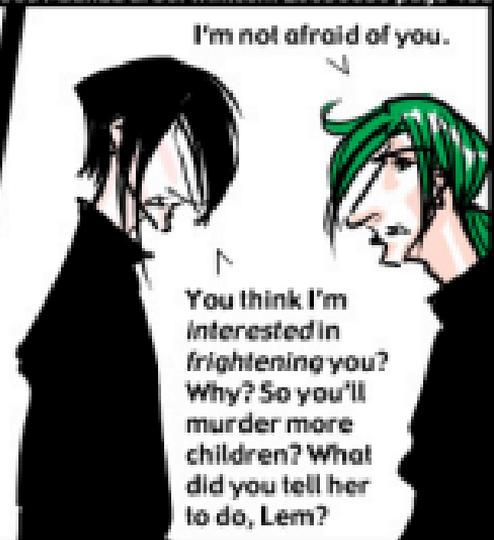
Cal called a meeting. ●

Elll could barely stand.
I've rarely seen anyone
so frightened. ●



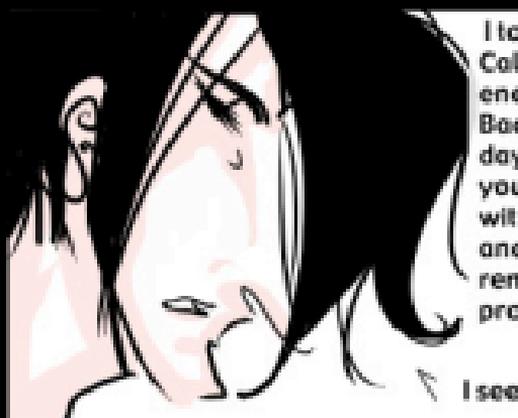


What did you tell her to do, Lem?



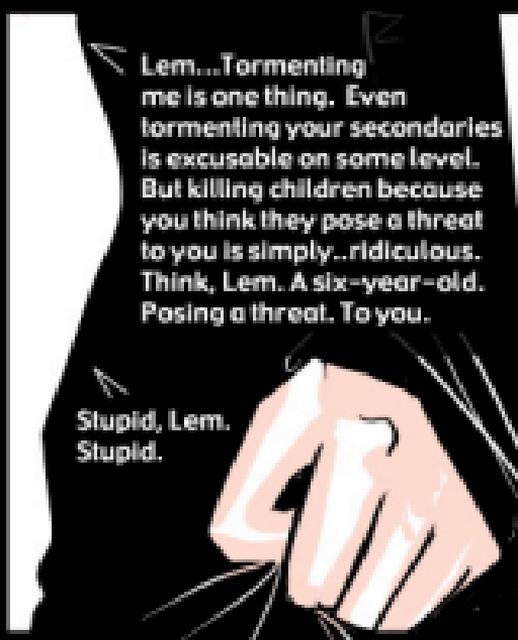
I'm not afraid of you.

You think I'm interested in frightening you? Why? So you'll murder more children? What did you tell her to do, Lem?



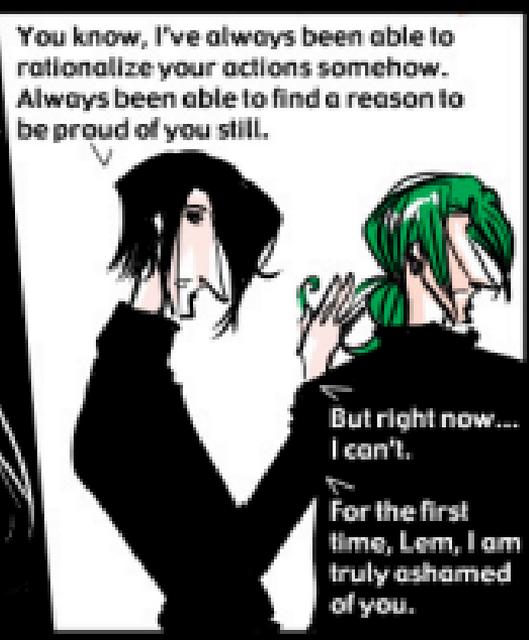
I told her...to find a Callaneriallian energy spike. Back in the old days. So that you'd kill him without realizing, and you wouldn't remember processing him--

I see.



Lem...Tormenting me is one thing. Even tormenting your secondaries is excusable on some level. But killing children because you think they pose a threat to you is simply...ridiculous. Think, Lem. A six-year-old. Posing a threat. To you.

Stupid, Lem. Stupid.



You know, I've always been able to rationalize your actions somehow. Always been able to find a reason to be proud of you still.

But right now... I can't.

For the first time, Lem, I am truly ashamed of you.

Did you even consider
how he was as much
your nephew as he
was my son?



That's it?
You're not going
to do anything
to me?! >

What could I do, Lem?
You're my brother. >

What's your standard
for murder, Lem? >
Anyone of my blood,
whom I love?

Why, then, you're the last.
Kill yourself, and
you'll have
accomplished your
greatest victory.
My compliments. >



Why do you persist in this? You make everything so *messy* and ... complicated!

I don't want to be your brother, and you don't want to be mine. Neither of us want it, so why don't you disown me?



You learned that from our mother -- that if you want anything badly enough, it becomes true.

Perhaps she was right. We *are* elementals.

But from what I can see, not everything works that way. Or *should*.



If you grow up one day, you'll know that too.



I think it's time to consider our future, ladies and gentlemen. We've structured ourselves around Lem up to this point, but as his entire value system seems to have collapsed in on itself, we should be asking ourselves a few questions.

What are we trying to do...

...and where do we go from here?

I thought he would at least give Lem a bloody nose...but something in his head had just..turned off. He gave me all the photos of Asne and Corwin he had. He was afraid he'd burn them & regret it later.



He no longer cared, so I turned Lem's pictures to the wall.



Our fuse was blown. All our venues had been cut off. There was nothing else to do but lie around feeling pathetic.



And then.. a few days afterwards...



Cal? Why are you holding that?

I was going to end something. But now I forget. Well. You're hungry. We could end that. Let me take this, and I'll make you lunch. Okay.

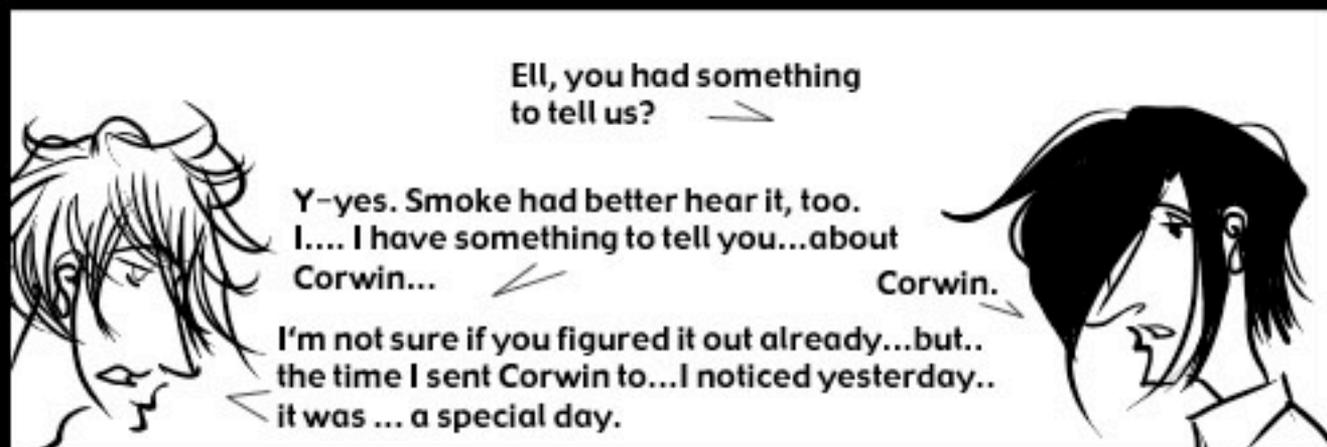


Ding dong

That's the door. Could you get it, Cal? Fern's in the shower.



Okay.



A special day?



It..it was the day Lem found Smoke, Cal. A-and we checked.. it was also the same place.

Smoke is Corwin.



No. That isn't possible.



I can assure you, it is. I imagine your lineage combined with the impact of raw death energy served to destroy your mortal body and convert your memories into an alternative form of life that allowed you to resurrect without form, memory wiped but powerful.



I-I d-don't know how you'll ever forgive me, Smoke, but I'm so g-glad you're not exactly dead!



Er. Ell...

Nobody blames you, Ell, unless they're an idiot. Lets be going, I'm sure they have things to discuss.



Goodbye, then.

thmp

< Cal?

Cal never blamed Ell.

Yes, well.

Thank you for coming.

*knock
knock
knock*

Cooming.

What? Did you micro-
wave a can of whipped
cream again?
Why are you on the floor?

Cal...Cal...Fern...Smoke is..
Fern is... Smoke is my... Cal
is your...

Smoke?

Smoke,
do you
know what's
the matter
with him?

Can I have a REPLY?
What's the matter
with you two?
I can hardly help
if you're going to
keep me in the dark!

...Hey, Smoke. Are you
upset? What---

HE --HE'S MY SON!

Cripes. That explains a lot.

Look...guys...this just...this doesn't have to be bad, okay?



Just stop a minute and think, okay? There's no hurry.

Is there any way we can prove this? Does he have a widow's peak?



Doesn't matter. Corwin didn't have one.



Well...Does he resemble Asne? I always wondered where he got that skin tone..

His nose...

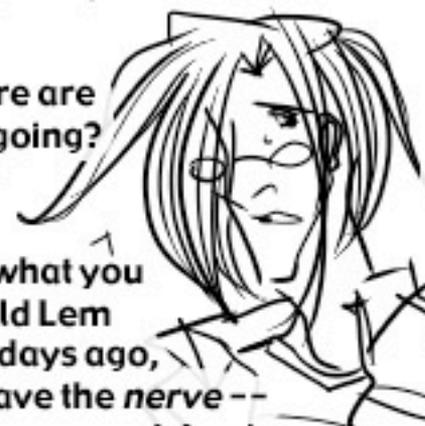
Would a genetic test work?

P...probably. You know.. he looks rather like his --...

His what?

Nevermind.

Where are you going?



After what you just told Lem a few days ago, you have the *nerve* --

We're not speaking of this ever again.

It's not the same -- I just-- I can't talk about this.



.....

Oh, Smoke.





shuffle

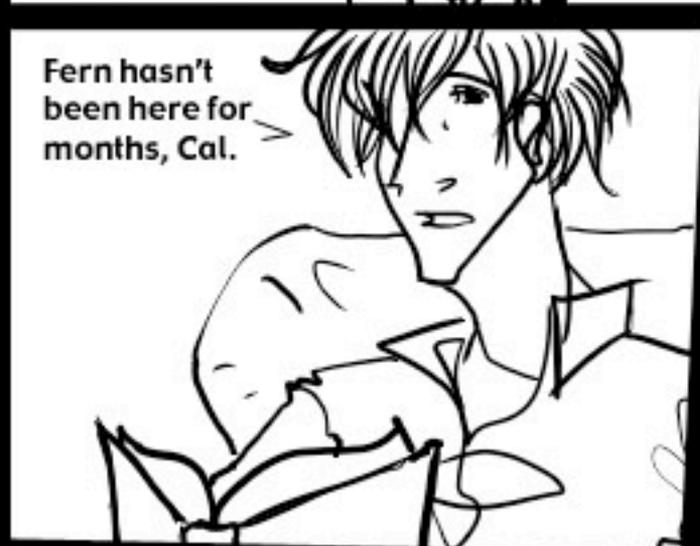


cough

Fern?

Feerrrrrn.

FERN.



Fern hasn't been here for months, Cal.



Months? But...What's the date?

It's April 5th, 4979, Cal.

You slept for nearly a year.



I didn't mean..so long...Just wanted to not think for awhile...

You were pretty overwhelmed, Cal.

And Fern's gone? Where is he? When will he be back?

I don't know. He implied I should not look for him. I imagine he isn't coming back until he's ready, Cal.



Oh.

You've woken at a good time, though. Mid is coming home for a little bit. He wanted very much to speak to you.

Mid...Mid...

Your minion, Cal?

Oh. Yes. Haven't you been lonely?

Er..no. I'm all right.

Are you sure? I really didn't mean to abandon you...

I'm okay, Cal.

All right...but... We have something to talk about, don't we? We should do that.

You have glorious bed hair.

No! You're not going to distract me!

Cal, I really think--

It's not my intention to guilt you into comforting me, I don't need that-- I don't want to connive you, or use you. I realize how disappointing and awful this might be for you-- discovering who your parents are--I mean myself, you have nothing to be ashamed of in your mother--

Cal, I've never had the inclination to worry who my parents were. I have family.

You don't feel your origins are important?

I think it's good we know where this power comes from-- but I wasn't pitting anything by it.

You're so sensible, Smoke...It's just.. You know how I am with authority. This is another kind of authority-- and I'd just as well let you know-- I don't want to stumble into abusing it.

Cal, you've always petted me, and hugged me, even drooled on me in your sleep. Nothing's changed.

It HAS! W-what if the nillits accuse me of nepotism?!

I don't know how to do any of that. fatherly ... affection stuff..so I understand if you don't want me to touch you..



So...You want things to remain as they have been?

Short of pretending it didn't happen, yes.

But. You were so upset when we found out, Smoke.

That wasn't so much about you as discovering my mother was dead, Cal ... and I figured you'd be angry because ... I'm not your little boy.

...I see. Your mother...



I wish...

We really have to get ready, Cal.



All right...

Mid wants to go to this art museum. I'm going to pick him up, then stop back here for you. Gives you time to shower. I bought you a new shirt.

Art museum? Wouldn't he like you along better?

None of us hates you, Cal.

...I'm sorry. That was rude.

Just..one more thing, darling.



Is there something, anything, I can do for you..as your father?

You'd promise me something like that? Seriously?

I trust you to ask for what is plausible and worthwhile.

But you know what I'll ask for.

That's what you'd like, then?

Of course. You think it's possible?

No.



Later, at the museum.



Hey, skinny. We're all set.
Smoke will meet us here
at this lion statue in
a couple hours.



He said we should
probably eat something.
I recognize
an order when
I hear one.
You willing
to eat yet?



Um. I'd rather not.
Can we look at
some pictures first?



Sure. We
can look at
a few. But
you'll eat,
right?



^
Cheesecake?

Wow, specific
today. Anything
you want. >



Before I start, I just want you to know that I don't mean to yell at you, or threaten you, or hurt you in any way. I just want you to know how things are, and I don't think anyone else is really in a condition to do that anymore. I'm sorry I've stayed away for so long, but I think it's helped me. ↘

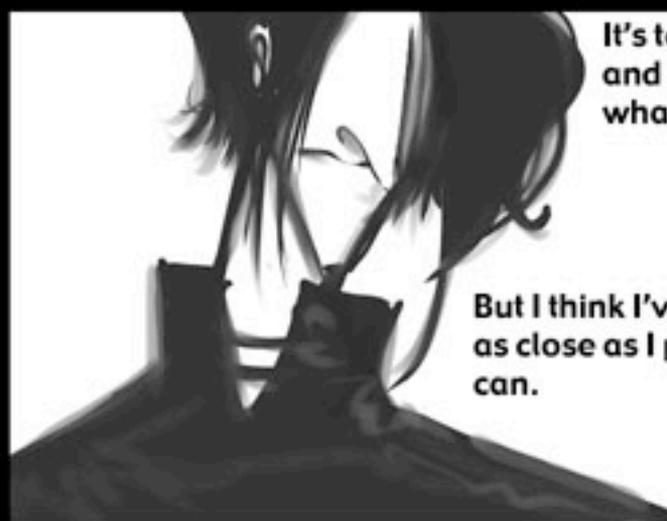


And if you let me, maybe I can spread what I learned around a bit.

Fern thinks you're sick, Cal. But he doesn't know just *how* you're sick.



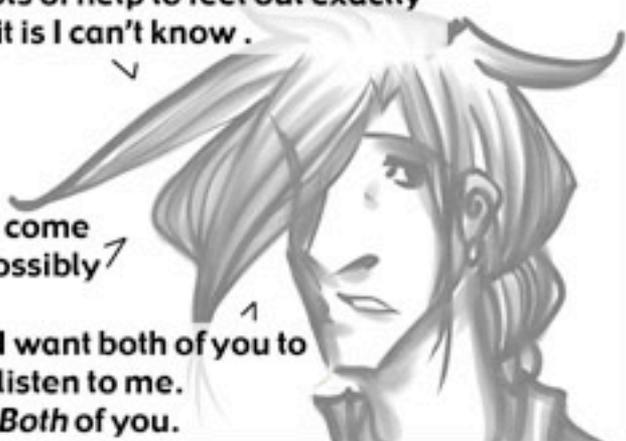
I can't quite touch it, but I think I know enough now. ↘



It's taken me a long time and lots of help to feel out exactly what it is I can't know. ↘

But I think I've come as close as I possibly can. ↗

I want both of you to listen to me. *Both* of you.



It's a funny thing. Mortals expend a lot of effort romanticizing unconditional love. ↘



I used to think the best kind of relationship was where someone loved you, no matter what. But, if you think about it, unconditional love is a pretty cheap thing to have. ↘



Love is valuable to us *because* it has conditions. You've taken a lot of freedom with Fern, Cal, that you shouldn't have. You were able to do that only because Fern doesn't like himself very much. He never will. Loving you ↘ gives him strength.



Fern loves Cal because it keeps Fern going. Because no matter how many notches you take out of him, the strength he gets in exchange is worth it.

That's how he is. But you were just lucky, Cal. I'm not like that. I don't need to love you--whoever you are-- for my strength.

If you don't *try* to make yourself better, I won't be able to love you anymore. But I don't want to stop. I demand a better future than this, you two.

I demand it. ↘



I don't expect you to be a magician. I think I used to. You *made* me, I had it set in my head that you could wave your hand, and make everything better ... and I hated you because you wouldn't. But it's a curse only time could break, isn't it? It's a tough one. I wouldn't have gotten this far if it weren't already starting to decay. I bet you're so used to it, you don't even think about being free anymore. >

It's like slamming your hand in a car door. It hurts the worst right after you open the door...and you'd almost rather stand there, trapped, too afraid of how much it will hurt to get loose.



✓

Secrets are so lonely, and you had no choice.

I'm sorry this is how your life has been.

But things will change. I'm sure of it.

↙



So. Ready for that cheesecake?

✓



All right. ↑